UNIVERSITY OF WINCHESTER

Negotiating Endings in Contemporary Fiction:

Narrative Invention and Literary Production

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Doctor of Philosophy

June 2020

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis is a theoretically and empirically informed account of endings in contemporary fiction. Its central claim is that for the critic, writer, publisher and reader, endings are a privileged site where different ways of making meaning in the literary text converge and where literary judgements are made. Its contribution is in seeking to enable dialogue between critical, popular and practice-based perspectives by developing a methodological approach that reconstructs the styles of reasoning at play in these perspectives. Part One examines the role of endings as a locus of critical attention alighting on particular moments in critical history where debate on endings has come to the fore. It outlines the contribution of narratology in establishing a set of critical descriptors and turns to reader-response theory to examine how we might assess the experience and discourse of literary publics on endings. The research suggest that the voices of 'ordinary' readers and the literary industry have been occluded in the debate. Part Two presents original empirical research investigating how endings are conceived, discussed and valued outside the academy, from the perspective of creators, producers and consumers of literary fiction. The research data comprises qualitative interviews with novelists and representatives of the literary industry and mixed methods research with book groups, comprising questionnaires and focus groups. From this research I draw a practice-based lexicon, distinct from (though overlapping with) literary-critical discourse on endings. In Part Three both critical vocabularies and practice-based discourses are deployed in close readings of novels by Naomi Alderman, Kate Atkinson, Kazuo Ishiguro, Ian McEwan and Wyl Menmuir. These readings highlight central questions emerging from the research including the role of endings in the definition of literary fiction, the author's responsibility to the reader and the concept of 'landing' as an alternative to critical preoccupations with 'closure' and 'completeness'.

Key words: contemporary fiction, literary fiction, endings, closure, narrative, publishing, readers.

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Central Research Questions

What is the relationship between the closure of a story and the ending of a novel in contemporary literary fiction? How do literary publics (both readers and the literary industry) experience and talk about endings? What role does this response play in the process of literary creation? Are endings one of the features that signals the distinction between 'literary' fiction and 'commercial' fiction (including genre fiction)?

The central claim of this thesis is that endings matter, for critics, for authors and for readers (whether professional literary readers or the reading public). They matter for a range of reasons: some of which, like the first of the questions above, point inwards, to the text itself: its form and its meanings; and some of which point outwards, to the context in which the text is received, understood and judged. The latter part of this claim points to my underlying conviction that it is misleading and reductive to think of the contemporary literary novel as a text without context: a work of art forged in the mind of a great writer and transferred into print for posterity to judge. Novels are written and published within a creative, economic, social and political structure. In the twenty-first century, the reception and consumption of literary fiction is a social event, with literary festivals, readings, book signings, media appearances and prize ceremonies all part of an author's role, thousands of book groups across the UK meeting regularly, while reviewing sites and book blogs proliferate on social media. The study of the contemporary novel needs to find ways of considering the novel within this context.

This study is a theoretically and empirically informed account of why fictional endings matter and why they are seen as an important and contentious feature of narrative by critics, authors, literary publics (including agents, publishers, reviewers and prize judges) and 'ordinary' readers. These four groups offer separate, though overlapping, perspectives on the question of endings. My aim in this study is to put these different perspectives into dialogue and in doing so to interrogate the relationship between author and reader, between author and publisher, between author and critic, and between reader and publisher in the processes of literary production and consumption.

Contextual Considerations

The problem of how to end well has long preoccupied writers of the novel but there are particular moments in literary-critical history where debate on endings has reached boiling point. As we will see in Chapter One, one of those moments is the birth of the Modernist novel, with writers including Henry James, André Gide, Virginia Woolf and E. M. Forster and Joseph Conrad challenging the assumptions of the nineteenth century social novel. In critical history we see such a moment with the publication of Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending* in 1967. In Chapter One I argue that the critical context in which the book appeared – just as the stranglehold of the New Criticism began to make way for a plurality of critical approaches – was crucial in informing Kermode's methodology and is one of the reasons the book had an impact in emerging areas of criticism that are typically discrete. However, it is also instructive to consider the historical context in which the book was produced. Writing in a fearful America, only three years after the Cuban Missile Crisis,[1] it is not surprising that Kermode was impelled to examine how we make sense of life and fiction in the shadow of apocalypse. He notes that 'one of the conditions of a preoccupation with the idea of "the end" is that we tend to feel our own time stands in extraordinary relation to it.' (1967:94). This was true in the mid-1960s, but is just as true of our contemporary age of anxiety. Though, with the end of the Cold War, our fears of imminent nuclear annihilation may have largely abated, we live, read and write in the shadow of existential fears around climate change, global terrorism, financial collapse, population displacement, populist politics and, from the perspective of 2020, global pandemic. Such anxieties are reflected in the explosion of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fictions published since the Millennium within both generic science fiction and literary fiction, for example Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003 –2009), Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2004), Emily St John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014) and Michel Faber's *The Book of Strange New Things* (2014). This literary production has been accompanied by a growing body of critical engagement with ideas of apocalypse, much of which explicitly traces its lineage to Kermode's study. But even when we are not considering the problem of (for example) how to end an end-of-the-world fiction, in an age shaped by what Lauren Berlant describes as 'crisis ordinariness'(2011:10), it may be especially pertinent to revisit some of the foundational questions raised by Kermode. How does fiction help us to make sense of life (our own and human life in general)? Does it have value in affirming a shared humanity and

[1] The book is based on a series of lectures given at Bryn Mawr College in 1965.

giving us a sense of hope amidst the ruins? What is its role in memorialisation and mourning? These are not only questions that help us navigate the apocalyptic fictions that Kermode and his more recent successors write about, but questions that are highly pertinent to other forms of fictional response to twenty-first century crises, from the traumatised narratives of post-9/11 New York writers such as Jonathan Safran Foer in *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) or Don DeLillo in *Falling Man* (2007), to Kamila Shamsie's classical framing of the political response to radicalisation in *Home Fire* (2017). The meaning and function of such fictional responses is a defining feature of the study of contemporary fiction but Kermode's observations about the relationship between function, form and readership – his idea of plot as 'the clock's tick-tock' (1967:45) – have been less considered. This study aims to redress some of this balance.

There have been waves of critical interest since Kermode, traced in Chapter One, but it is notable that endings seem to have become a preoccupation of cultural debate outside the academy in the last decade. If this may be partially attributed to a feeling that our present moment stands in 'extraordinary relation' to ideas about 'the end', new forms of cultural production are also implicated, with the popularity of long-form television a particular influence. It is a form that has its own problems with endings: how to terminate a narrative that viewers have devoted 60 hours to watching; how to leave an ending open enough to allow a new series but not require one. The ambiguous denouements of *The Sopranos* or *Mad Men* and the 'compromised' ending of *Game of Thrones* have attracted vigorous discussion and disagreement.[2] Such controversies are mirrored in a slew of recent articles on novel endings. These include, for example Rourke (2012) arguing in favour of ambiguity and loose endings, Williams (2012) suggesting that unresolved plots are tortuous for readers, Lea (2013) arguing that literary fiction should not eschew happy endings, Acocella (2012) on 'inartistic endings' and Chung (2010), offering a contemporary typology of contemporary endings including 'endings that make you want to reread immediately', 'endings that leave you marooned in sensation', 'endings that cannot be summed up in words', 'endings that are open to interpretation' and 'the unmemorable ending'.

My focus is this thesis is more specific. I concentrate on contemporary literary fiction, with a particular focus on novels published since 2000. In this period, the open endings and

[2] There were over 1.8 million signatories to a petition calling for the final series of *Game of Thrones* to be remade 'with competent writers' (change.org 2019).

experimental forms of postmodernism have given way to new tastes within the literary novel and indeed in cultural production more broadly, developments traced in Chapter One. Some critics have detected a renewed appetite for closure. Parey (2019), for example, notes a tendency towards closure in the contemporary historical novel, especially neo-Victorian fiction, a shift that she traces back to the publication of A. S. Byatt's *Possession* in 1990. She cites Byatt's view that 'closure is the really revolutionary narrative mood of the moment […] these things come in circle. […] I think people have a huge hunger for this.' (Tredell 1990, referenced in Parey 2019).

Before I begin to examine the form, function and purpose of endings, I want to turn to the definitional question of what is meant by 'literary fiction'. The distinction between literary and genre fiction is a subject of vigorous debate in the critical literature and will be explored further in this thesis, with particular reference to the role of endings in genre definition. I start from the presumption that, as Robert Eaglestone argued in a recent interview, 'there is no such thing as a magic 'literary' element *(literonium*) that all 'literary' texts share', and that though genre fiction may often have a more 'closed' form than literary fiction, this is far from universally the case.' (Wintersgill 2019). Since this is an outward facing study, it adopts an industry-led approach. Publishers and literary agents define a genre of 'literary fiction' for marketing purposes and it is this definition that Bhaskar, Millar and Barreto (2017) draw on in a report commissioned for Arts Council England. I asked each of my interviewees in Chapters Four and Five to explain their understanding of the literary and I also asked reading groups to engage with the question. In Part Three I confine my readings to novels that were previously discussed in the empirical research. All of the novels discussed may be seen to have been designated as 'literary' by the industry, through their nomination for one or more of the UK's major literary prizes.

In drawing on publishing industry genre distinctions and embracing the validation of literary prizes, this definition raises the question of the category of the literary middlebrow, which, for Driscoll (2014; 2016) goes beyond a categorisation of cultural products to incorporate cultural practices. Drawing on a previous definition from Sullivan and Blanch (2011), for whom the middlebrow is an aesthetic mode, a set of dissemination and transmission practices and a set of consumption practices, Driscoll outlines a form of literary engagement which is 'middle-class, reverential towards elite culture,

entrepreneurial, mediated, feminized, emotional, recreational and earnest' (2014:6). Her contribution is one of a number of studies published since the 1990s (e.g. Rubin 1992; Radway 1997; Carter 2004; Brown and Grover 2012), seeking to reclaim a term that has been in derogatory usage in literary studies since Q. D. Leavis's *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932) and Virginia Woolf's essay 'Middlebrow', published in *The Death of the Moth* (1942), in which Woolf snobbishly derides middlebrow novels as 'a mixture of geniality and sentiment, stuck together with a sticky slime of calf's-foot jelly.' (1967:200).

While I see no significant problem with the use of the term 'middlebrow' to understand a particular category of novels published between the 1920s and 1950s as outlined by Humble (2001) and to probe what Radway (1997) describes as a 'gender anxiety' around the 'feminization of culture' in that period, I find its use to define large swathes of contemporary literature and literary practice much more problematic. The middlebrow is a deeply loaded term with a racist etymology[3] and it remains both classist and sexist. It ascribes particular values to women's writing and reading and middle-class writing and reading (and therefore by extrapolation to men's literary engagement and working-class literary engagement). It is inevitably hierarchical, implying that there are preferred 'highbrow' forms of cultural production and cultural engagement – which are those forms sanctioned by university English – and thereby downgrading every form of literary discourse that isn't critique. It also suggests that there is a distinctive 'lowbrow' form, though it is notable that there seems to have been no parallel scholarly attempt to reclaim this term (the term 'popular fiction studies' cannot be said to be doing the same work). I also have concerns about the breadth of Driscoll's definition, partly because there is a clear disconnect between the use of the term to describe particular forms of cultural production (broadly, anything that does not belong either to the mass-market or the avant-garde) and its deployment in defining a set of cultural practices. In Driscoll's understanding, it can in principle be applied to any form of engagement between readers and literature that happens outside the academy. For example, she suggests (2016:3) that The Booker Prize was founded to stimulate book sales and can therefore be considered as middlebrow. However, the prize was also established as the British equivalent to the prestigious French Prix Goncourt, designed to reward significant artistic achievement. Clearly, there is clearly a tension here and it permeates the discourse reported in Part Two of this thesis, which

[3] It derives from the pseudoscientific claims of phrenology that the height of the brow equates with intellectual calibre (Rubin:xii).

records both literary publishers' and prize judges' navigation between Bourdieu's 'autonomous' and 'heteronomous' poles of cultural production, but the ascription of the label 'middlebrow' does not adequately articulate its nuances. Equally, in suggesting that the middlebrow is 'earnest', Driscoll notes that it often associates culture with social issues and that the Hay Literary Festival has run streams on issues such as environment and globalization, but in fact such associations are a central feature of the scholarly study of contemporary fiction and they inform the organisation of academic conferences, not least because they are issues that contemporary novelists engage with.

Thus, though this thesis includes an examination of professional modes of reading and valuing literary fiction and a study of its reception by book-club readers and in doing so it engages with some of the ground claimed in such conceptions of the middlebrow, I explicitly avoid using the term. It seems to me to reify a dichotomy of highbrow/middlebrow; intellectual/affective; autonomous/heteronomous and indeed feminine/masculine responses which are unhelpful either in categorising literature or in making sense of our response to it. Readers respond to books both intellectually and affectively whether they are academic, professional or 'ordinary' readers; writers of even the most 'highbrow' literary fiction seek to move readers as well as challenge or discomfort them; publishers of all fiction (even the most experimental, postmodern or genre-defying work) must navigate a commercial market before readers can read at all.

Contemporary fiction offers a rich and complex body of data to draw on in analysing the purposes and forms of endings. Cribben-Merrill (2011:194) has argued that it is difficult for critics to put forward a satisfactory overarching theory of narrative closure, because writers have concluded their novels in such myriad ways. Even those critics who lament the strictures of the novel form acknowledge that writers will always find a way to subvert them, a way to make the reader see the world anew. Discussing a new wave of 'reality fiction' Wood argues that:

> For at least a century, in recurrent spasms of correction, The Novel has been blamed for ossified convention: the codified palaver of plot, character, dialogue, conflict, development, epiphany, closure; the deluded transparency of realism. Th[e] need to blow up convention, widely shared among serious writers, has resulted in brilliant and energetic work that would be hard to categorize as postmodern or post-postmodern—work by Teju Cole, Lydia Davis, Geoff Dyer, Sheila Heti, Karl Ove Knausgaard, Ben Lerner, and Jenny Offill, among others. Our age appears to have a strong reality hunger [...] and a certain kind of traditional

> fiction-making seems to be not hungry enough—fattened on convention, a little lazy with success. (Wood 2016:n.pag.)

This suggests that the novel is, at root, committed to novelty: it is the work of novelists to look for ways to astonish and confound the reader. What makes this form so endlessly compelling, may also make it difficult to study, at least in typological terms. As an illustration of the variety and complexity of form of the contemporary novel and its endings one might examine the 2019 Booker shortlist, in which we find a boisterous postmodern retelling of *Don Quixote* with an ending that intertwines narrative and metanarrative (Rushdie 2019); an 1000 page experimental novel set inside the head of an Ohio housewife in which the narrative momentum comes from wondering how its single sentence is going to end (Ellmann 2019); the sequel to a classic work of feminist science fiction, which draws in the threads of the open-ended earlier novel to bring a sense of ethical resolution (Atwood 2019); a multi-perspectival narrative of black British female experience with a scenic ending that brings the characters into dialogue (Evaristo 2019); an account of the last moments in the life of a murdered Istanbul prostitute and her memories of a vivid, violent, sensual life (Shafak 2019) and a multilingual retelling of *The Odyssey*, narrated by the guardian spirit of a Nigerian chicken farmer, with what its author has described as an 'almost cosmic structure'[4] (Obioma 2019).

Structural Considerations

Though I am working with contemporary readings of recent novels in this study, I write with the assumption that the work of novelists and the experience of readers draws on a set of expectations about the novel's form informed by a much longer literary history: readers may jump straight from Virginia Woolf to Chigozie Obioma; and authors may flex their writing muscles by re-reading Laurence Sterne, Elizabeth Bowen or B. S. Johnson. Thus, I start by situating my research questions within a historical framing of the development of the literary novel, examining some key 'moments' in literary history when endings became a subject of particular scrutiny. I move on to look at the critical literature on endings, beginning with Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending* (1967), which Ingersoll points out 'is now almost universally acknowledged as the beginning of "contemporary" concern with ending' (2007:15). With this book Kermode launched two separate strains of thought on the importance of endings. His contribution, influenced by Russian formalism,

[4] See Brockes 2019.

on how narrative form has been shaped by readers' desire for closure, launched a narratological literature on the relationship between endings and closure, which is the primary focus of Chapter One. His book also offers a philosophically and psychologically-engaged exploration of why endings matter to the reader, arguing that there is 'a need in the moment of existence to belong, to be related to a beginning and to an end.' (1967:4). Since my study is foundationally engaged with the experience of readers, Chapter Two moves on to survey the critical literature on reader responses to literature, from the theoretical work of reader-response theorists such as Fish and Iser to empirical work including Radway's ethnography of Romance readers in the mid-West of America (1984). My particular interest is in seeking intersections between these two bodies of critical literature, on endings and on reader response and with this aim in mind I engage with the rhetorical reader-response criticism of Phelan and others, and with recent empirical research on reader response. I go on to trace the methodological influences behind my research design which include sociological approaches to the production and consumption of media texts and previous empirical studies conducted with editors, literary agents and reading groups. The final chapter in Part One introduces and provides methodological justification for the research design of the empirical element of the project, explaining how my research subjects were selected, how the data was gathered and how it was analysed.

Part Two presents and analyses the data gathered in the empirical research undertaken for the study. The first element of this research is semi-structured interviews with seven novelists reflecting on their own writing practice, their engagement with their readers and with their agents and publishers, with particular regard to endings. The second element is eleven qualitative, semi-structured interviews with representatives of the literary industry: literary agents, editors and literary critics who have acted as judges for some of the major UK literary prizes. The third element is a mixed-method study of reading groups combining questionnaires, participant observation and focus-group research. A concluding chapter draws together the three perspectives, tracing a move from the creation of the novel through the process of production to its reception by readers and interrogating the effects of the process of 'making public' on the craft of fictional endings.

In Part Three of the study, these 'public' perspectives on the process of literary creation, production and reception combine with the narrative perspectives of Part One to inform the readings of particular literary texts, selected on the basis that they had already been

discussed by at least one of the groups studied in Part Two. Chapter Eight is a detailed reading of a single novel: Kate Atkinson's *A God in Ruins* (2015), drawing on the multiple perspectives outlined in Parts One and Two. Chapter Nine opens out to discuss four novels, with particular reference to two of the central themes emerging from the empirical research: the question of whether the author has a responsibility to the reader at the ending of the novel and the question of whether endings are one of the signifiers of literary-genre distinction. The novels selected for this chapter are Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001), Wyl Menmuir's *The Many* (2016), Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2006) and Naomi Alderman's *The Power* (2016). The five novels studied in Part Three offer a range of ending strategies: two have relatively open endings (*The Many, Never Let Me Go*); one employs a more emphatic closural mechanism, with both narrative closure and metanarrative closure (*The Power*); two have endings that problematise the distinction between openness and closure, offering a new perspective that demands the novel is rethought by the reader (*A God in Ruins, Atonement*).

These ending strategies are examined with reference to the narratological armoury discussed in Part One, but also with reference to the experiences of the groups of readers and writers studied in Part Two. My reading of these texts is distinct from readings one might find in the work of either narrative theorists or reader-response critics. Far from stripping away situational considerations of the writing and reading of texts in order to reveal the 'pure' underlying structure of the text, as structuralist critics aim to do, my readings draw on suggestions from and interactions with the readers and writers who are my research subjects. Nor do I engage, as a proponent of Fish's affective stylistics might, with the reader's emerging perspective as they work through the novel. Rather, I situate myself at the end of the novel, considering, on the basis of the responses I studied in Part Two, what the reader's perspective of the text might be at the culmination of their first reading, and how that might change on a second reading.

What I intend with this thesis is, first, an account of the creation, production and reception of the novel as essentially a 'craft-work' that may certainly emerge from an artistic imperative, but crucially also, is crafted for an audience of 'real' readers, with the engagement of a literary industry that is in itself an 'interpretive community' of readers; and, second, a mode of critical reading that engages with such practice-derived perspectives, alongside the critical perspectives more familiar to university English. I seek a

critical approach that acknowledges the text and context of the novel in the experience of reading, as an intellectual, emotional and affective process.

Chapter One – Literature Review I: Literary and Literary-Critical Perspectives on Endings and Closure

Introduction

The distinction between *endings* and *closure* is much debated within the critical literature. This chapter will outline the ways in which each has been defined and the relationship between them conceptualised, but it begins with the observation that while endings and narrative closure may coincide in some fiction, they are not synonymous, even in pre-modernist fiction. A novel may end without any sense of closure, or some kind of closure may occur well before the end of the novel. Endings may involve a denouement, which may be part of the formal narrative closure, but may also be distinct from the reader's experience of closure. Some novels include an epilogue, afterword or appendix, taking the story beyond the ending. Nor are endings necessarily synonymous with the author's completion of a book. Mullan (2006:304) points out that Kafka's unfinished novel, *The Trial* has a very clear ending, with the death of the protagonist Joseph K. and a famous last line,[5] which Kafka seems to have written very early in the novel's development. Churchwell (2013:365), notes that F. Scott Fitzgerald originally wrote the celebrated last paragraph of *The Great Gatsby* as the conclusion of the first chapter. The American novelist John Irving is reported always to begin writing a new novel with the final sentence, which he sends to friends before he begins writing and challenges them to verify, when the book finally appears, as identical to the published ending.[6] Despite the difficulties of precise definition, a central claim of this study is that endings are important because they are precisely the point in the narrative where the relationship between reader and author is made manifest. Parker and Binder (1978:132) point to the widespread nineteenth century assumption that authors were expected to 'deal responsibly' with audiences – effectively fulfilling a contract with the readers who provide their living. The convention of a direct address to the reader at the end of the book (perhaps most famously expressed in Charlotte Brontë's 'Reader, I married him' in *Jane Eyre*) makes explicit both the author's understanding of this contract, and their desire to communicate its impending termination.

[5] 'Like a dog!" he said. It was as if the shame would outlive him.' (Kafka (1925).
[6] '[H]e writes the last sentence of each novel first. Not just an *idea* of the last sentence, but the actual sentence, complete with characters named and conflicts resolved. He sends the sentence on a postcard to selected friends, who file it away and then, years later when the book comes out, check to discover that the ending has not altered by so much as a semicolon.' (Harrigan 2005).

A Brief Literary History of Endings

Milan Kundera (1988:74) describes the development of the novel as a parallel history of the Modern Era. As a genre with a relatively short history, the novel has been from the beginning a form in flight from the Aristotelian unities that governed drama. It is a literary genre that has developed through creative practice, reflecting the preoccupations and the moods of its contemporary context. Since it came into its own, and arguably found its widest readership in the nineteenth century, its conventions are partly Victorian ones and we understand the modernist novelists and their postmodern successors as convention-breakers. Kundera points out that its history didn't begin with the social novel and its development of a form that mirrored the contained structures of nineteenth century society; it began much earlier with Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605 and 1615). Kundera argues that we see in Cervantes that the earliest history of the novel is bound up in a desire to 'escape the unilinear, to open rifts in the continuous narration of a story' (1988:74). The narration of Quixote's journey is continually interrupted by tales of other travellers' journeys. Eagleton discusses the prescience of another early contribution to the genre, Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759), in anticipating modernist concerns about the neat structures of the realist novel: 'Sterne's novel is really a narrative about the impossibility of narrative, at least of a realist kind. What it has seen is that realism, strictly speaking, is beyond our power.' (2014:111).

From the beginning, novelists inscribed their ambivalence about the artifice of the social novel and its expected ending into their texts, and it is often this ambivalence that cements Parker and Binder's 'contract' between reader and author. The ending is where each party recognises both their appetite for closure and its artificiality. Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749) concludes with ironic nod to the unreality of the ending: 'Thus, reader, we have at length brought our history to a conclusion, in which, to our great pleasure, though contrary, perhaps, to thy expectation, Mr Jones appears to be the happiest of all humankind.' In *Northanger Abbey* (1817) Jane Austen's narrator interjects with the playful comment that 'My readers [...] will see in the tell-tale compression of the pages before them, that we are all hastening together to perfect felicity'. Clery (2011:163–4) describes this as one of the moments in which Austen subverts the nineteenth century's novel reader's addiction to conventions of closure; she frequently withholds the pleasure of a conventionally romantic

ending, or darkens her endings with satire. George Eliot concludes *Middlemarch* (1871) with the observation:

> Every limit is a beginning as well as an ending. Who can quit young lives after being long in company with them, and not desire to know what befell them in their after-years? For the fragment of a life, however typical, is not the sample of an even web: promises may not be kept, and an ardent outset may be followed by declension; latent powers may find their long-waited opportunity; a past error may urge a grand retrieval.(1972:831)

That the relationship of novelists with the endings expected of them by readers was not always smooth, even in the heyday of the social novel, is clear from the number of novels for which we are aware that there are alternative or rewritten endings, including Austen's *Persuasion* (1818), in which the final chapters were entirely reworked, Dickens' *Great Expectations* (1861) in which the ending was changed after Dickens sought the advice of his friend Edward Bulwer-Lytton, and Hardy's *The Well-Beloved* (1897) in which the volume edition is radically different from the earlier serial edition.

It would be disingenuous to suggest that the great novelists of the nineteenth century were either in thrall to conventional structures or unreflective about their work, but the end of the novel and the closure of the story are, nonetheless, closely affiliated in much pre-modernist fiction, even where this affiliation is the subject of a certain ironic detachment. Critical history (e.g. Friedman 1966, Huyssen 1988) suggests that their relationship begins to unravel in the late nineteenth century, partly due to the internal aesthetic development of the novel and its promotion as high art by figures including Henry James in America and André Gide in France, who aimed to write a text in which 'l'action n'engagera pas'(Gide 1927).[7] Friedman argues that one of the features of the modernist transition was that 'the English novel moved gradually from a closed form of experience to an open form of experience' (1966:xv). It is in the early novels of Henry James: *Roderick Hudson* (1875), *The American* (1877) and *Daisy Miller* (1878) that we begin to see unsettling conclusions replacing consoling ones. James's unresolved endings and those of contemporaries including Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne initially attracted criticism from both reviewers and readers and his essay, 'The Art of Fiction' (1884) is partly a response to those

[7] Gide categorised his early novels as 'récits' (narrations). His aim, finally realised in *Les Faux-Monnayeurs* (*The Counterfeiters,* 1926) was to write a novel with 'construction en abyme', in which the plot is replaced by a network of subplots and themes linked by a counterpoint technique, with the ending of the novel conceived as a new 'point de départ'(see O'Brien 1951).

critics. Here James is withering about 'the distribution of the last of prizes, pensions, husbands, wives, babies, millions, appended paragraphs, and cheerful remarks'(James 1984:3) that both critics and the public had come to expect of the 'happy ending' of the realist novel. In the preface to the New York edition of *Roderick Hudson* in 1907, he explains the understanding he had come to as a novelist that:

> Really, universally, relations stop nowhere, and the exquisite problem of the artist is eternally but to draw, by a geometry of his own, the circle within which they shall happily *appear* to do so. He is in the perpetual predicament that the continuity of things is the whole matter, for him, of comedy and tragedy; that this continuity is never, by the space of an instant or an inch, broken, and that, to do anything at all, he has at once intensely to consult and intensely to ignore it. (2011:5)

The key phrase here is 'appear to do so'. James is suggesting a complicity between reader and author. Each knows that the ending is necessarily contrived – there can be no fictional ending that is not fake, but unlike Fielding, James does not choose to draw attention to this in a direct address to the reader. To return to Parker and Binder's notion of 'deal[ing] responsibly with audiences', James seeks to fulfil his contract with the readers who provide his living, but wants still to produce work worthy of achieving the higher ends of the art novel. This is what James talks about in his preface to *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) as 'the finer tribute' of interpretation by an intelligent audience: 'a golden apple for the writer's lap'. (1996:13)

The innovations of James and his contemporaries heralded a major break from the conventions of the nineteenth century social novel and a new intensity of formal experimentation, in which narrative closure was a key element. This was carried through to the work of their modernist successors including Joseph Conrad, William Faulkner and Gertrude Stein. Eagleton contrasts the morally ambivalent, fragmented narratives of James and of Conrad with the Victorian conviction that a key function of art was to raise the spirits: 'gloom was regarded as morally debilitating. It could even be regarded as politically dangerous' (Eagleton 2013:103). He notes that Emily Brontë manages to contrive a happy ending in the most bleakly tragic of Victorian novels, *Wuthering Heights,* while in *The Heart of Darkness* the fable soon begins 'to blur, dissolve and crumble at the edges', revealing that 'progress is purely illusory. There is no hope in history.' (2013:109).

James was an unusually prolific and assiduous commentator on his own literary practice, frequently revisiting his work as his ideas developed, but his modernist contemporaries also wrote critically and influentially about their changing perceptions of the novel art. Writing in a 1905 essay of the striking novelty of James's endings, Conrad notes that 'a solution by rejection must always present a certain lack of finality, especially startling when contrasted with the usual methods of solution by rewards and punishments, by crowned love, by fortune, by a broken leg or a sudden death.' (1921:18). According to Conrad, what is starkly new in James is that:

> One is never set at rest by Mr. Henry James's novels. His books end as an episode in life ends. You remain with the sense of the life still going on; and even the subtle presence of the dead is felt in that silence that comes upon the artist-creation when the last word has been read. It is eminently satisfying, but it is not final. Mr. Henry James, great artist and faithful historian, never attempts the impossible. (1921:19).

James was writing in a particularly fast-changing publishing climate. In the late nineteenth century rising literacy rates coupled with technological developments in printing and paper production and new distribution networks via road and rail, led to a boom in the popular novel. New genre forms were emerging and attracting large number of readers. The late nineteenth century saw the growth of the sensation novel (e.g. Wilkie Collins, Mary Elizabeth Braddon), the detective novel (e.g. Arthur Conan Doyle, Grant Allen) and the beginnings of science fiction (e.g. H.G. Wells, Jules Verne); while the early twentieth century saw an explosion of feminine 'middlebrow' fiction (e.g. Rosamond Lehmann, Stella Gibbons, Nancy Mitford), much derided by Henry James and by Virginia Woolf. Later developments included the launch of the Penguin Crime Paperback in the 1930s and the pioneering Gollancz Science Fiction list in the 1950s. The high modernists were very explicitly distinguishing themselves from such popular forms. Resistance to the conventions of 'storytelling' became a key point of distinction for the literary novel, one of the ways it acquired cultural capital and drew attention to its status. Ironically this resistance to endings itself became one of the (meta-)conventions of the literary novel.

High modernism is widely associated with the avant-garde – with aesthetic and intellectual challenge and with the rupturing of genre conventions and dominant ideologies alike. Ehland and Wächter (2016:2) argue that though the 'middlebrow' novel is often categorised, derogatively, as its opposite – an unchallenging, middle class form, suitable for

public libraries and associated particularly with female readers and writers, middlebrow novels too can challenge dominant ideologies and socio-cultural expectations. They prefer a distinction that sees the latter as (to use Fiske's term) 'producerly' texts, rather than Barthesian 'readerly' or 'writerly' texts. They may have the accessibility of a readerly text and the openness of a writerly text, but they have much less interest in directing the reader's attention, rather offering themselves up to popular production (2016:3). However, McGurl's study (2001) of Henry James and his circle reveals that despite the struggle of modernist authors to distinguish the 'art novel' from popular forms in this period, they never lost their desire to court status within the mass market. Despite the modernists' claims, finding a way to appeal to the 'common reader' (while being true to one's artistic vision) was a preoccupation for literary authors in the late nineteenth century just as it is now.

In *Aspects of the Novel* E. M. Forster comments with apparent light-heartedness on authors' difficulties with endings: 'Nearly all novels are feeble at the end. [...] If it was not for death and marriage, I do not know how the average novelist would conclude', but the point he makes is a serious one about the limitations imposed by narrative expectations that derive from Aristotle: 'The plot is exciting and may be beautiful, yet is it not a fetish, borrowed from the drama, from the spatial limitations of the stage? Cannot fiction devise a framework that is not so logical yet more suitable to its genius? (1927:95).

In the ninety years since Forster wrote this, far from devising any kind of framework, fictional styles and fictional endings have divided along countless, Borgesian forking paths. In the postwar period we see a move from modernism's *conscious* rejection of narrative closure to the *self-conscious* resistance of postmodern metafictions. If literary periods can be defined by the questions they pose about the relationship between the fictional and the real,[8] in postmodern fiction we see a turn to often playful self-reference in place of representation. This may involve, for example, the introduction of the author into the novel, as with Kurt Vonnegut or Martin Amis's work (indeed in the latter's 1984 novel *Money*, the author appears in more than one guise, with a narrator called John Self and a minor character called Martin Amis). Hawthorn argues that the effect for the reader of this blurring of the real and fictional is like watching a film in which the camera and director are in constant view (2010:79). For Burgass 'beginnings and endings have a special function in

[8] Robert Eaglestone, quoted in Wintersgill (2019:n.pag.)

postmodern metafiction, marking the entrance and exit of the fictional world and its parallel time' (2000:183). Examples of novels that draw attention to their own fictionality as they conclude are David Lodge's *Changing Places* (1975), which ends with a pastiche of Austen's comment from *Northanger Abbey* about the 'telltale compression of pages', and Julian Barnes' *Flaubert's Parrot*, which contains the following suggestion:

> If novelists truly wanted to simulate the delta of life's possibilities this is what they'd do. At the back of the book would be a set of sealed envelopes in various colours. Each would be clearly marked on the outside: Traditional Happy Ending; Traditional Unhappy Ending; Traditional Half-and-Half Ending; *Deus ex Machina*; Modernist Arbitrary Ending; End of the World Ending; Cliffhanger Ending; Dream Ending; Opaque Ending; Surrealist Ending; and so on. You would be allowed only one, and would have to destroy the envelopes you didn't select. (1984:89)

Barnes' gesture towards multiple possible endings draws attention to the postmodern novel's rejection of singular truths and its embrace of the multiple, shifting, fragmentary nature of modern life. John Fowles offers the reader three alternative narrative paths at the ending of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) while Flann O'Brien's *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939) opens with the assertion that 'one beginning and one ending for a book was a thing I did not agree with. A good book may have three openings entirely dissimilar [...] or for that matter one hundred times as many endings.' In formal terms, such moves illustrate Lyotard's definition of postmodernism as an 'incredulity towards metanarratives'. This poses a challenge to both plot and character as meaningful concepts: Lyotard claims that 'the narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language' (1984:xxiv), while for Derrida (according to Hutcheon (1988:59) 'closure is not only not desirable but also not possible'. Italo Calvino's 1979 novel *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*[9] is a radical example of disruption to conventional expectations of narrative coherence. It contains both numbered chapters and named chapters: the former offer a continuous narrative concerning events happening to the reader (addressed in second person) who is reading a book called *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*; the latter are the beginnings of ten different narratives, ranging across genres, each broken off at a crucial point, though their themes are taken forward in the numbered chapters. The last line of the novel is: 'And you say, "just a moment, I've almost finished *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* by Italo Calvino.' (1982:205). This kind of playfulness about form is indicative of a rejection of the high

[9] Published in Italian in 1979 and in English translation in 1982.

seriousness of modernist fiction. Modernism's obsession with the distinction of the 'art-novel' is similarly rejected and we see a blurring of the boundaries between literary and popular forms, for example in postmodern reworkings of the detective novel such as Umberto Eco's *The Name of The Rose* (1980), where the central mystery is disrupted with a complex network of subplots, or Paul Auster's *Leviathan* (1992), which subverts the conventional closure of the genre by identifying the murderer in its opening pages.

Nonetheless, the innovations of postmodernism are not all connected with narrative disruption. Joseph Brooker notes that the storytelling quality that had disappeared in Woolf and Joyce actual makes a comeback in postmodern writing, though often in the form of fictions that contain many stories, pointing to Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion* (1987) and Julian Barnes' *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* (1989) as examples (Brooker 2012:121). One of the enduring forms that postmodernism introduces is what Linda Hutcheon (1988) terms historiographic metafiction, in which category we might include, for example, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) and A.S. Byatt's *Possession* (1990), both novels with highly immersive storytelling and complex endings, but also, as more recent examples, two of the novels discussed in Part Three: Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001) and Kate Atkinson's *A God in Ruins* (2015). Eaglestone and O'Gorman note a critical consensus in recent years that 'postmodernism has begun to fizzle out gradually, replaced by works that maintain postmodernism's self-reflexive playfulness while also adhering to an underlying sense of emotional truthfulness' (2019:2) while Daniel Lea (2012:261) suggests the 'desire for the real' in postmillennial fiction emerges from an ethical turn in 1990s postmodernism in which we see an 'ideal of authenticity as a way of living'. He points to Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) and W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* (2001) as examples of this shift.

What implications does this have for the form of postmillennial fiction and for endings in particular? This is one of the questions this thesis explores, through engagement with practitioners (both authors and literary professionals), with readers, and through readings of a range of postmillennial novels. It is certainly the case that the contemporary novelist has a vast range of models: from the structured metafictional fragmentation of *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller*, a particular influence in the contemporary work of David Mitchell; to novels that reach back to earlier modernist influences, present, for example, in Jay McInerney's elegiac, Fitzgeraldian final passages or in Zadie Smith's twenty-first century

reworking of *Howard's End* in *On Beauty* (2005); while Sarah Waters' most recent novels are artful, immersive reworkings of the early twentieth-century middlebrow novel.

Postmodernism's blurring of the genre/literary divide has opened a permanent door for contemporary novelists: Margaret Atwood, Ian McEwan, Kazuo Ishiguro, Cormac McCarthy and Jeanette Winterson, among others, work frequently with 'genre' structures, both celebrating and subverting their conventions. Questions of how we distinguish a literary from a popular novel become ever more difficult to answer (and perhaps, ever less relevant). Mullan (2011) suggests that one of the signals may be in the way that the literary novel draws attention to the means of its telling, something we see in several of the novels discussed in Part Three. In this, endings must play a central role. Endings may be gapingly open, they may be ambiguous, they may offer complete or partial closure; they may, as Hawthorn suggests, leave the reader 'puzzled or unsatisfied in ways that are productive of further thought' (2010:145); they may challenge, complicate, frustrate and divide readers; but it is only at the end, when the contract between reader and author expires, that the reader takes stock of what has been told and can make sense of their reading experience.

The Sense of an Ending

Kermode's 1967 book launched two separate strains of thought on the importance of endings, both of which became central to later critical debate. The first was a philosophically and psychologically-engaged exploration of why endings matter to the reader. The second was the influence of this deep-seated psychological need for endings on narrative form. For Kermode, purpose and form are inextricably interlinked. He gives the analogy of a clock, ticking continuously, but in making sense of its time we are predisposed not to hear 'tick, tick' but to hear an opening 'tick' and a closing 'tock'. He describes plot as 'the clock's tick-tock (...) an organization that humanizes time by giving it form.'(1967:45). Kermode relates his 'tock' and the meaning that narratives take from their ending, to death and to apocalypse.

Kermode's book emerges from an intellectual context in which the stranglehold of the New Criticism in university English departments was replaced by a fragmentation of critical perspectives, as scholars sought to redefine the function of criticism in a free society. It draws on a long tradition of theological and philosophical considerations of 'the end' from Jewish and Christian apocalyptic writing to Kierkegaard. It also draws on Aristotle's *Poetics*

and his concept of *mythos* as the organisation of events that sets characters on their tragic journey and brings about the emotional involvement of readers. In terms of the more immediate critical context, it responds to the growing influence of Russian formalism on Western literary criticism in the 1960s. Among Kermode's immediate predecessors were two influential works on literary openness. In the first of these, *Strains of Discord*, Adams rejected the value placed by formalist critics on structural unity, arguing that 'the open form' (work that 'deliberately declines to resolve its assertion-patterns in a major way' might offer the reader a heightened effect of 'relevance', 'intensity', and 'extend experience instead of compacting it' (1958:210–11). The second work was *Opera Aperta* (1962) in which Eco examines the open-endedness of modern works of art across several media. Kermode also drew on an essay by Burke (1959), exploring how literature might function as a 'rhetoric of Catharsis' in which the writer, exploiting psychological universals, effects an identification between the reader and the work so that the reader experiences the narrative resolution as her or his own.

As Brooks notes (1984:22), Kermode was by no means the first critic to argue that what compels readers in narrative is a knowledge of death that we cannot possibly know within our own lives. But it is in Kermode's work that we see most vividly that, as Lanser argues in *The Narrative Act* (1981), in the Aristotelean sequence of beginning, middle and end, it is the end that has a disproportionate influence on form, because everything else is leading up to it. For Kermode, human need is foundational to understanding its narrative productions. He argues that, at root, fiction is about sense-making. It is part of a quest to satisfy one's need to know the shape of life in relation to the perspectives of time: 'There is […] a need in the moment of existence to belong, to be related to a beginning and to an end' (1967:4). Kermode believes that the portrayal of apocalypse in narrative from the Jewish scriptures to the poetry of Yeats is fuelled by an existential desire for narrative closure:

> To make sense of their span [humans] need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to our poems [...] the End is a figure for their own deaths. (So, perhaps are all ends in fiction, even if represented, as they are for example by Kenneth Burke, as cathartic discharges.) (1967:7).

Kermode describes us, in a phrase from Spenser, as 'men in the middest', thrust into the middle of a story, with a hazy idea of the beginning and a longing for the 'sense of an ending' to be able to make a coherent pattern of our experience. Fiction, at its best, enables us to make sense of our experience of an uncertain world.

With regard to the influence of this deep-seated psychological need for endings on narrative form, Kermode notes that: 'Broadly speaking, it is the popular story that sticks most closely to established conventions; novels the clerisy calls 'major' tend to vary them.' (1967:17). He argues that a story that proceeds simply to an obviously predestined end is nearer to myth than a novel. While we do wish the narrative to reach a conclusion, we also like to reach that point by an unexpected or circuitous path. Thus, the idea of *peripeteia*, from Aristotle's *Poetics*, is part of the construction of even the most basic stories:

> The more daring the peripeteia, the more we may feel that the work respects our sense of reality; and the more certainly we shall feel that the fiction under consideration is one of those which, by upsetting the ordinary balance of our naïve expectations, is finding something out for us, something *real.* (1967:17)

Crucially, Kermode argues, peripetiea only works well if there is a certain rigidity to our expectations in the first place.

Kermode returned at least twice to the questions raised by *The Sense of an Ending*. In a 1978 essay *Sensing Endings* he looks more closely at the contribution of the reader in simultaneously interpreting and creating meaning in fiction. He develops an observation originally made by Shklovsky in *Theory of Prose* (1993 [1929][10]) about the 'illusory ending' – a poetic conclusion which may be a remark about the weather, or the scenery, for which the reader is forced to supply his or her own interpretation and therefore his or her own narrative ending. In discussing the contribution of the reader in simultaneous interpreting and creating meaning in fiction, Kermode references Barthes' *S/Z* (1990 [1970]) suggesting that 'the text is engendered out of *lisibilité,* and the interpretation out of *scriptibilité*. Hence it comes naturally by its continuities, its *plaisir* and its *jouissances*.' (Kermode 1978:152). Kermode returns to the experience of readers in 'Waiting for the End' (1995), exploring how they may collude with the author in bringing about the end of a fictional work, developing what may merely be 'structural hints' given in the text in the interest of 'synchronicity rather than mere chronicity' (1995:251). In this essay he develops an argument that humans are predisposed to seek out *pleroma* – or the fullness that results from completion.

[10] Kermode cites an earlier (1966) French translation of the work.

Endings, Closure and Completeness

Kermode's phrase, the 'sense of an ending', reflects his interlinked interest in the psychological need for endings and their narrative dynamics. However, within the critical context of the time, it was his contribution to the latter debate that was most immediately influential. Following the publication of Herrnstein Smith's *Poetic Closure* in 1968, the term 'closure' replaces Kermode's 'sense of an ending' in the critical lexicon. Smith argues that:

> The novelist […] is likely to end his work at a point when either nothing could follow (as when the hero dies) or everything that could follow is predictable (as when the hero and heroine get married). The poet ends his work at some comparable point of stability […] that is either determined by or accommodates the poem's formal and thematic principles of structure. Closure occurs when the concluding portion of a poem creates in the reader a sense of appropriate cessation. It announces and justifies the absence of further development; it reinforces the feeling of finality, completion, and composure which we value in all works of art, and it gives ultimate unity and coherence to the reader's experience of the poem by providing a point from which all the preceding elements may be viewed comprehensively and their relations grasped as part of a significant design. (1968:35–36)

One of the preoccupations of the subsequent critical literature has been defining the meanings of closure and how it stands in relation to endings.[11] In *Narrative and Its Discontents* (1981), Miller justifies his choice of the word 'closure' over 'ending' claiming it refers more accurately to the functions of an ending, justifying the cessation of narrative and the completion of the meaning of what precedes it (1981:xi). That view is supported by Hult in *Concepts of Closure* (1984), who examines the etymology of the term, which comes from the Latin *clausura*, a participle form of the verb *claudere* (to shut or close), in contrast to the word 'end' which is a noun derived from the Germanic *ende.* Closure, then, is an act that generates ending, rather than the ending itself; the process that delimits the artistic unit or sets its boundaries. Miller and Hult's definitions should in principle permit discussion of the closure of an open-ended work of fiction, since closure is not synonymous with a closed ending: it simply implies the move from what Miller terms the 'narratable' to the 'non-narratable' (a distinction to which I will return). However, there are grounds for theoretical confusion here since the word 'closure' has come increasingly to be associated

[11] Indeed this is disputed terrain beyond literary criticism. Derrida (1988) makes a philosophical distinction between '*La Clôture*' and '*Le Fin'.*

with its use within psychology:[12] we expect closure to entail some kind of emotional resolution or catharsis.

Richter prefers the term 'completeness' to 'closure', since he argues it is possible to apply this more accurately to novels characterised by an open form. His book *Fable's End* (1974) is in part a response to Adams' earlier book, *Strains of Discord* (1958). Richter confines his discussion to what he terms 'rhetorical fiction', which he defines as narratives driven by a central thesis or doctrine, such as *Candide* or *Lord of the Flies*. His central argument turns on a differentiation between closure and completeness. Closure implies that the sense of an ending is felt; completeness is more akin to an intellectual satisfaction on the part of the reader that all the evidence required has been presented. The book is critical of those Richter terms 'the apostles of open form' and he aims to take work that had previously been read as open and show that though it might not achieve closure, it does achieve completeness. It is perhaps unsurprising that the book was attacked by Adams on publication (1978:106–108), both on the grounds that it relies on an unargued assumption that it is to the aesthetic advantage of a literary work to show that it is properly terminated and that his selection of novels indicates a misunderstanding of the concept of literary openness. However, Richter's division between closure and completeness has informed recent critical work, including that of Phelan, discussed in the following chapter.

In a special issue on 'Narrative Endings' in *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Hillis Miller argues that 'attempts to characterize the fiction of a given period by its commitment to closure or to open-endedness are blocked from the beginning by the impossibility of ever demonstrating whether a given narrative is closed or open' (1978:7). For Hillis Miller, closure is an aporia, in the sense that all narratives begin and end *in medias res* – both beginnings and endings always presuppose something anterior or ulterior. There is no moment when the reader can say definitively that the 'tying' (an image from Aristotle) becomes 'untying': they are the same thing.

Typologies of Closure

Torgovnick was the first critic to attempt a typology of popular strategies of closure. In *Closure in the Novel* (1981) she offers detailed readings of a limited corpus of eleven classic novels selected to give a chronological sense of developments in fiction. Torgovnick initially

[12] For example in the work of the psychologist Arie Kruglanski.

divides the novels into those ending with epilogues and those concluding with scenic endings. The former she defines, using the Russian Formalist critic Eikhenbaum's criteria, as a shift in time-scale or orientation and an element of after-history for the main characters. The latter is defined, according to the criteria of Henry James, as a final dialogue between two or more characters modelled after endings in drama. Torgovnick finds that the division into epilogues and scenes, though neat in theory, is imprecise and uninformative when applied to particular novels, since epilogues differ radically, and many include scenic elements. Consequently she supplements formal labelling with a collection of more nuanced terms, aimed at describing the various relationships that influence closure including the relationship of ending to the novel's shape, to the author's preoccupations and to the experience of the reader. Each of these closural strategies may be applied equally to epilogues and scenes. 'Circularity' refers to the common strategy of endings that recall the beginning; 'parallelism' refers to endings which go back to a series of points in the text; 'incomplete closure' may include elements that suggest circular or parallel closure but miss a vital element, resulting from authorial choice or formal failure; 'tangential' or 'open' endings head off in new directions; 'linkage' refers to sequels and series, where the plot is 'to be continued'. A second set of terms describes the authorial and readerly viewpoint of the action and characters of the novel where Torgovnick offers two possibilities: 'overview' and 'close-up'*:* the former a bird's eye view of the action, the latter a direct view, with no temporal distance separating the ending from the body of the novel (so readers may not understand why the end has been reached until they disengage emotionally from the action). A third set of terms describes the relationship between the author and the reader during closure as 'complementary', 'incongruent' or 'confrontational'; a fourth set describes the author's relationship to her or his own ideas during closure as 'self-aware' or 'self-deceiving'.

In *La Clôture Narrative* (1985) Mortimer replaces Torgovnick's geometric strategies of closure with a more detailed and historically specific typology of closural techniques used in a chronologically arranged selection of French novels. In Mortimer's reading, seventeenth century novels are characterized by a structure based on history, eighteenth century novels by a serial structure and a decentred closural form, while Romantic novels are characterized by arrested desire and often by the death of the heroine. Realist novels display the fullest form of closure in which all questions are answered, while the modern novel, starting with Proust, problematizes fictional closure and transforms art into its own finality. Hult's review of the book (1986) describes it as a conservative riposte to

deconstructionist analyses of closure such as that of Hillis Miller. Mortimer acknowledges Hult's characterisation, claiming her project is to chart the meanings of closure 'avant l'aporie et l'indécidable' (1985:220). The difficulty with Mortimer's account is the barrier it presents for any structural reading of novels after Modernism: the Postmodern novel continues to problematize fictional closure but this moves beyond the conscious resistance of modernism, to a self-conscious subversion of literary convention and a splintering of structural possibilities in which any notion of the finality of art is equally resisted.

The Narratable and the Non-Narratable

D. A. Miller is more sceptical about the possibilities of closure. In *Narrative and its Discontents* (1981) he makes a theoretical distinction between the 'narratable', and 'non-narratable' elements of the text. The narratable elements are 'the instances of disequilibrium, suspense, and general insufficiency from which a given narrative appears to arise […] the various incitements to narrative, as well as the dynamic ensuing from such incitements'. He opposes this dynamic movement with the essentially non-narratable 'state of quiescence assumed by a novel before the beginning and supposedly recovered by it at the end'(1981:ix). Miller's move from narrative to what propels it allows him to examine a central tension in the nineteenth century novel. He finds that Eliot, Austen and Stendhal direct their novels towards a 'utopic' state that is in radical opposition to the narrative means employed to reach it. Miller argues that Austen's narratives emerge out of an underlying instability in desire, language and society and yet they are directed to 'a state of absolute propriety', in other words traditional marriage and the reinstatement of respectable social relations. It is therefore inevitable that the 'dispersive and fragmentary logic of the narrative' should undermine the static nature of the closure to which it aspires. For Miller, '[t]he project of these novelists seems curiously perverse, as though each had chosen the vehicle (narrative) least suited to its desired tenor (propriety, transcendence, erotic intensity).'(1981:x). He argues that endings cannot succeed in providing adequate closure because of the difficulty of fully containing, or exhausting the narratable.

Recent work on closure includes Abbott's adaptation of Barthes' 'proairetic' and 'hermeneutic' codes shared by author and reader in making sense of narrative, the former concerned with expectations and actions, the latter with questions and answers. Abbott argues (2002:53–57) that closure in narrative may occur either at the 'level of expectations' or the 'level of questions' or both. He notes that, though closure is something readers may

look for in narrative, it is lack of closure that brings narrative to life. For Abbott: 'All successful narratives of any length are chains of suspense and surprise that keep us in a fluctuating state of impatience, wonderment, and partial gratification […] until the final moment of closure'.

Feminist and Queer Narratologies

In *A Literature of their Own* Showalter laments that formalist-structuralist critics have 'evaded the issue of sexual identity entirely, or dismissed it as irrelevant and subjective. Finding it difficult to think intelligently about women writers, academic criticism has often overcompensated by desexing them.' (1977:88–89). In response to these challenges, the 1980s saw the emergence of feminist narratology offering a new strand to critical interrogations of endings. Lanser (1986:343) notes that while narrative theory aims at identifying universal structures and separating them from thematic content or cultural codes, such seeming universals are often gendered. She goes on to point out that narratological theories of plot understand action as emerging from the intentions of protagonists, but this assumes that protagonists have the power to enact those intentions in the first place. This may be incompatible with female experience, either historical or textual (1986:356). Such moves in the critical literature are echoed in the views of novelists, for example Carol Shields has argued that 'women's writing has already begun to dismantle the rigidities of genre […] and to replace that oppressive narrative arc we've lived with so long, the line of rising action – tumescence, detumescence – what feminists call the ejaculatory mode of storytelling'.(Shields 2003:35).

Roof's *Come As You are: Sexuality and Narrative* (1996) makes a related claim from the perspective of queer narrative theory, arguing that narrative structure is typically heterosexual and reproductive, aiming at providing a sense of meaning that offers the reader psychological stability: 'Our very understanding of narrative as a primary means to sense and satisfaction depends upon a metaphorically heterosexual dynamic within a reproductive aegis'.(1996:xii) The ending is essential to Roof's reading, as narrative is always structured by the anticipation of the end of the story, and what we call a 'satisfying' ending, whether it includes 'knowledge, mastery, victory, another narrative, identity, [or] even death' (1996:xvii) is indicative of its reproductive mode.

Rules of Notice and Rules of Rupture

Rabinowitz is interested in how textual features work to guide the reader's experience of narrative. In *Before Reading* he focuses on what he terms 'rules of notice': textual features that call attention to the heightened moments of a work. His claim is that 'the stressed features in a text serve as a basic structure on which to build an interpretation' (1987:53). One of these 'privileged positions' is endings. Rabinowitz argues that the function of conclusions is to provide a point of vantage which enables the reader to make sense of the unresolved strands of narrative: 'Last sentences cannot serve to focus a reading experience (at least not an initial reading experience) but they do often serve to scaffold our retrospective interpretation of the book' (1987:62). Rabinowitz is interested not just in novel endings but in the endings of chapters and of episodes within the narrative, drawing particular attention to what he terms 'rules of rupture.' He points out that readers skim over the even and the unbroken but 'textual features stand out when they disrupt the continuity of the works in which they occur and when they deviate from the extratextual norms against which they are read' (1987:65).

In *Loose Ends* (1997) Reising posits a theory of 'non-closure' or even 'anti-closure' in the American novel. He acknowledges that many endings in American fiction even experimental postmodern fictions – do follow the patterns suggested by narrative theorists, with the ending space prepared for by the narrative that precedes it (1997:8) But Reising is sceptical of the reification of closure of traditional narrative theory. Like Miller he rejects the claim that narrative endings are always 'the embedded and fully coherent essence of the narrative act' (1997:7). Drawing on Rabinowitz's 'rules of rupture' Reising argues that a novel is always more interesting to the critic when it fails to achieve the closure it has been tending towards. Reising's 'loose ends' 'problematize, and sometimes explode exactly the issues which generate the narrative, and which, according to many theories of closure are precisely those narrative energies that conclusions exist to domesticate.' (1997:ix). His claim is that such ruptures refocus the reader's attention on the 'shadow narratives' that run alongside dominant storylines, effectively releasing the reader from the text and any expectation of endings that follow from the text, into an intertextual space of counternarratives and emergent discourses. For Reising these are points when Rabinowitz's 'extratextual norms' begin to invade the text and demand to be taken more seriously than the continuity of the narrative.

The Apocalyptic Turn

The critical tradition outlined above comprises a response to Kermode's focus on the narrative features of endings. Before moving to a consideration of reader-response theory, I turn briefly to a more recent critical literature drawing on Kermode's examination of the relationship between endings and 'end-times' and the lure for reader, both psychological and philosophical, of ideas of apocalypse. Kermode draws on apocalyptic narratives going back to the Epic of Gilgamesh and Virgil's *Aeneid*, through Jewish and Christian writing, to Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* and the poetry of Yeats. While *eschatology* (or the study of end things) is a significant and longstanding branch of Christian theology, Kermode's use of it in a literary critical work was unusual when *The Sense of an Ending* was published in 1967.[13] However, alongside an apocalyptic turn in both literary and genre fiction, the study of apocalypse began to emerge as a literary critical preoccupation around the turn of the Millennium.

As we saw earlier, with his 'tick-tock' model of plot in *The Sense of an Ending*, Kermode had suggested that the organisation of time within fiction offered a model for the way we find a pattern for time in history – both our own history and world history. In *The Promised End* (2000), Fiddes develops Kermode's analysis in a literary-theological dialogue on the *eschata* of narrative. His claim is that all texts are innately eschatological in the sense of being open to the new meaning that will come to them in the future and in being open to the horizon which death gives to life (2000:6). He argues that literary criticism is concerned not just with the text but with problems of existence, hope, society and the threat of death and therefore has common ground with theology. Fiddes argues that Kermode's representation of the book as a model of the world neglects the potential for literary texts to create new worlds of possibility. As a theologian he is interested in the capacity of the text 'to redeem as well as to console' (2000:14). For Fiddes the creative and redemptive power of texts may often be found in open endings. He sees Kermode as unduly bound up with the importance of closure, although this position seems to ignore the new perspective of Kermode's more recent essay, in which he stresses the expectation of renewal that lies beyond the apocalypse: the death of an old world is the beginning of a new one, suggesting that,

13 Though Northrop Frye's 'archetypal criticism', in particular *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (1982), treads adjacent ground.

paradoxically, our denials of all 'end-directed' history may be the apocalyptic elimination of apocalyptic thinking (1995:262).

Fiddes' critical intervention is framed by his Christian perspective, with apocalypse understood as eschatology – a form of moral education. Recent critical literature on apocalypse tends to come from a more sceptical postmodern viewpoint suggesting that we are mired in a modernist construction of apocalypse and that, since we now live in post-apocalyptic times, a post-apocalyptic theory is required. Rosen (2008:176) argues that such a postmodern apocalypse challenges the crucial defining and stabilising elements of the traditional myth. Heffernan (2008:11) notes that we live in a world in which 'the idea of the end no longer functions as direction, truth, or foundation'.

Perhaps the 'sense of an ending' Kermode talks about, or Fiddes' sense of redemption, are dependent on the preservation of what Eliot called 'fragments to shore against our ruin' or at least some sense of openness about our ending. In a world in which, as Lauren Berlant (2011) claims, our conception of the Good Life is 'cruel optimism', how should authors write endings and how should readers read them? James Berger's *After the End* (1999) is an exploration of character of this post-apocalyptic terrain, moving from visions of the end, to visions after the end across a variety of contemporary fictions. If narrative marks the human passage on earth, what happens afterwards? Berger repeats the challenge posed by Wittgenstein (1922:27): 'In order to draw a limit to thinking, we should have been able to think both sides of this limit (we should therefore have been able to think what cannot be thought)'. He notes that very few apocalyptic representations do actually end with the End, there is always some post-Apocalyptic fragment. Berger links his narratives 'after the end' to the literature of trauma. He argues that after both trauma and apocalypse all existing structures of identity, language, and memory are erased and narratives must be reconstructed by means of their traces, their survivors and their ghosts (1999:34).

Chapter Two – Literature Review II: Reader Response and New Methodologies

Introduction

In this chapter I move on to a discussion of the literary critical developments in reader-response theory that emerged in parallel with the narratological tradition, though only occasionally intersecting with it. At its core, reader-response theory refers to a body of work that seeks to move from theories of text to the study of reading: it is the reader, not the text who is privileged. Scott (1994:461–4) notes that exposing the structure of a text and accounting for its impact are very different activities and reader-response theorists cannot draw on a theory of signs that is removed from the individual circumstances of reading but rather need to reach out into everyday life, where readers come to a text with widely varying experience. The influence of this varying experience on responses to the text is a central preoccupation of reader-response theory. As we will see, some reader-response theorists perceive that the text is created by the reader, while others (for example the proponents of rhetorical reader-response theory) tend much more to the view that the text, (and the craft of the author) shape the reader. One can, to a certain extent, plot the position of reader-response theorists on a scale between these two opposing poles.

The reading process first emerged as a field of critical attention in the 1930s in the work of Harding and of Rosenblatt. It began to develop further in the 1950s and 1960s (in parallel, in fact, with the literature on endings and closure), partly as a critical response to the dominance of the New Criticism. Tompkins traces the history of the field from Gibson's introduction of a the concept of the 'mock reader' (1950) as an interesting 'added element' to an assuredly text-centred, formalist reading of literature, to a point at which the emphasis on the reader begins to erode and finally to destroy any notion of an 'objective text', requiring critics, like Fish, to radically redefine both the aims and methods of their study of literature. She argues that, in retrospect Gibson's essay 'constitutes the first step in a series that gradually breaks through the boundaries that separate the text from its producers and consumers and reconstitutes it as a web whose threads have no beginning and no end'. (1980:xi).

In her helpful typology of the field (2014:169–187) Tyson distinguishes two schools of reader response that remain relatively text focused and three schools which are more

radically reader-oriented. In the former camp there is Rosenblatt's transactional reader-response theory, later developed by the Konstanz School of Iser and Jauss, and the affective stylistics of Fish. Tyson sees the development of rhetorical reader-response theory, in the work of Booth, Phelan and Rabinowitz as an extension of Rosenblatt and Iser's transactional theory (2014:205). In the latter camp we find subjective reader-response theory, psychological reader-response theory and social reader-response theory (the latter being Fish's development of his earlier work on affective stylistics.)

Transactional Reader-Response Theory

In *Literature as Exploration* (1938) Rosenblatt analyses the transaction between text and reader. She attaches equal weight to each: the text acts as a stimulus to the reader's individual response, a response that is mediated by each reader's individual life experience, environment and prior reading; but the text is also a blueprint that we go back to in order to correct our interpretation. Reading, for Rosenblatt, is always an iterative process. She understands the transaction as dependent on an 'aesthetic' stance towards the text – the reader's emotional response to it – as opposed to an 'efferent' stance (from the Latin 'effere' meaning 'to carry away') which would be based exclusively on the information imparted by the text. In Iser's work, especially *The Act of Reading* (1978), we find the concepts of 'determinate' and 'indeterminate' meaning in the text, the former referring to the facts and events of the text, the latter to 'gaps' in the text: actions that are not clearly explained, inviting readers to create their own meaning. The reader's experience is created by the interplay between determinate and indeterminate meaning. Crucially, for Iser, the reading activities through which the reader constructs meaning are prestructured by the text. Following in the footsteps of Iser, Hans-Robert Jauss (1970:7–37) defines literary history as a dialectical process of production and reception. He suggests that readers' perspectives on a text are historically conditioned: 'A literary work is not an object which stands by itself and which offers the same face to each reader in each period.' (1970:10). For each work and at each period, reader responses are conditioned by the reader's 'horizon of expectations' and this may mean that readers interpret and indeed value a text entirely differently from the previous generation. We do not read Jane Austen now in the same way her contemporaries did, but we also don't read her in the same way that we did in the 1980s. Jauss's theory has been applied more to the study of literary history than to the interpretation of contemporary fiction, but there are aspects of his project that are

highly pertinent to this study. For Jauss we always approach a text armed with our knowledge of other similar texts. As we read, the beginning of a text provokes anticipation of the development of the work and of its ending on the basis of our previous experience with the genre. Our response to the text is formed by the interplay between our horizon of expectations and the 'horizon of change': the gap between the two is identified as 'aesthetic distance'. Jauss suggests that 'the way in which a literary work satisfies, surpasses, disappoints or disproves the expectations of its first readers […] gives a criterion for the determination of its aesthetic value.' (1970:15). Work that fulfils our expectations tends to be what Jauss calls 'the realm of ''culinary" or light reading'. Each such dialectical interaction creates a new horizon of expectation and thus gives rise to the birth of new literary movements. Thus, in order to appreciate the artistic contribution of a classic work of literature we must 'read against the grain' of accustomed experience to understand how the work must have appeared to its first readers. A further feature of Jauss's discursive approach, is that, unlike much reader-response theory, it accounts for the possibility and indeed the hope that engagement with a new text may expand the reader's understanding and transform their expectations.

Affect and the Act of Reading

The early work of Fish (1967; 1970) puts forward a reading method termed 'affective stylistics'. While this is often understood, like transactional theories, as a text-centred approach, Fish is most interested in how the reader's experience of the text changes moment-by-moment during the reading. Tyson describes it as an approach in which 'a literary text is an event that occurs in time –that comes into being as it is read – rather than as an object that exists in space.' (2006:175) Fish emphasises the importance of '*meaning as an event*, something that is happening between the words and in the reader's mind' (1970:128). The method demands a close reading of each line of text in order to understand precisely how it affects the reader and a comparison of the response of different (informed) readers to show that there is consensus regarding the experience produced by the text, or to contend that because there is no consensus the text provides an 'unsettling' reading experience. With the publication of 'Interpreting the *Variorum*' (1976), Fish makes a decisive move away from his earlier work (and indeed destroys the theoretical basis of much previously published reader-response scholarship at the same time.) While in the earlier work Fish had argued that the meaning of a text was in the mind of the reader, rather than in the text per se, the reader was nonetheless assumed to have

been directed by particular properties of the text. With '*Variorum*' this idea of a pre-existing text to which the reader is responding melts away. Fish now sees any textual feature that critics could point to as a stimulus for a particular response as the product of a particular interpretive framework; in Tompkins' gloss: 'texts are written by readers, not read' (1980:xxii). In subsequent work (1980), Fish argues that our reading practice is pre-determined by the 'interpretive communities' to which we belong. These communities of readers are based on shared beliefs about texts, the world and the act of reading, beliefs that establish legitimate and illegitimate categories of behaviour for readers and define acceptable or unacceptable interpretations of the text. Fish's account was a key influence in Radway's work on the romance reader (1984) to which I will turn later in the chapter.

Bleich's *Readings and Feelings* (1975) outlines a pedagogically-oriented practice of subjective reader-response theory, which Bleich develops theoretically in a later book: *Subjective Criticism* (1978). As with Fish's later work, Bleich sees no text beyond the meanings created by readers' interpretations. For Bleich, the work of the critic is not to analyse the literary work itself, but the written response of readers to that work and their analysis of this response. He sees the experience of reading as a process of 'symbolisation' and 'resymbolisation'. The original reading experience is symbolic because it occurs not in the real world but in the conceptual world that exists in the mind of the reader. Thus, when we interpret the meaning of a text we are actually interpreting the meaning of our own symbolisation. The act of interpretation is an act of resymbolisation. Bleich's method was exemplified in his own teaching practice, in which he encouraged his students to write first an 'experience oriented response statement' to their reading of a text and second a 'response-analysis statement' in which they explained their personal responses to particular textual elements and analysed how these various responses built to create meaning in the text as a whole. He also encouraged group discussions of response statements, demonstrating to his students the ways in which communities produce knowledge and the role of the individual reader as a part of that process. While Bleich did not experiment with his method beyond the classroom, it is certainly a strategy that could certainly be developed with other reading communities, such as book groups.

The Role of the Reader's Identity Theme

The psychoanalytic critic Holland also worked within a tradition of subjective reader-response, but his primary interest is in the psychological dynamics of the reader's

relationship with the text. Holland's claim is that readers react to literary texts with the same psychological responses they bring to their everyday life and he is much more interested in what readers' interpretations reveal about themselves rather than about the text. For Holland:

> The literary critic comes to psychoanalysis because psychoanalysis promises to tell him something about people. Psychoanalysis has nothing, nothing whatsoever, to tell us about literature per se. But psychoanalysis, particularly in its theories of character, has a great deal to tell us about people engaged in literature, either writing it or reading it or being portrayed in it. (1982:30)

For Holland, our response to the text and to the world is always filtered through our 'identity theme'. While our interpretations of literary texts are always products of our own psychology this is not always clear to the reader because the reader-text transaction takes place through a sequence of operations that Holland (1976:338) labels 'defence strategies', 'fantasy strategies' and 'transformation strategies'. In the first stage, the reader approaches the text with a bundle of pre-existing desires and fears, adapting their perception of the text to gratify their desire for pleasure and to minimise pain. In the second stage the reader projects their own fantasies into the text. In the third stage anxiety or guilt results in a subliminal transformation of these emotional responses into a thematic understanding of the text. The reader experiences what Leitch (2000:189) refers to as 'a coherent and significant experience of moral, intellectual, social, or aesthetic unity and wholeness.' The process enables a focus on the intellectual interpretation of the text, rather than an acknowledgement of the primacy of the emotional response. In Holland's early work he does not deny the existence of a subjective text (and indeed, as Tyson points out (2006:182) he describes his method as 'transactive'). In his later work he becomes particularly interested in the application of his method for the study of particularly authors, writing influentially on Robert Frost (1989). For Holland the writer is always a reader first, reacting to the world through the prism of her or his identity theme. His claim is that understanding an author's identity theme and experiencing a 'mingling of self and other' allows the reader a richer identification with and experience of the text. It is this aspect of Holland's work, the dialogue between author and reader (whether that reader is a representative of the literary industry, a book group member or an individual reader) in the experience of fiction, that I find especially interesting in the empirical chapters that follow.

The Death of the Author and the Birth of the Reader

A contrary position is taken by Barthes, in 'The Death of the Author' (1967). The critical contribution of French poststructuralism is outside the US and German dominated tradition of reader-response criticism, but nonetheless related to it. Barthes argues that our reading of literary work must be separated from the authority of its creator. For Barthes the author is merely a *scriptor*, whom we must understand as being born simultaneously with the text. He denies the possibility of interpreting a text definitively; rather it is the job of the reader to untangle the numerous strands of a text's multiplicity texts and to create it anew with each reading:

> [T]here is one place where this multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not, as was hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space in which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but it is in its destination. […] we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.' (1967:148)

Barthes's account of the death of the author may be argued to have something in common with the New Criticism's notion of an 'intentional fallacy', though unlike the New Criticism, Barthes equally rejects the notion of the critic as an authority: indeed he enjoins the reader to 'let ourselves be fooled no longer by […] arrogant antiphrastical recriminations of good society'. With deconstructionist theorists like Paul de Man, he stresses the disjointed nature of texts and the impossibility of any definitive interpretation. Writing two years later in 1969, Foucault's challenge was to 're- examine the empty space left by the author's disappearance' (1992:303). He argues that the concept of authorship is tied not only to the relationship between text and creator, but to a series of complex processes and social relationships through which discourse circulates, more accurately encapsulated in the term 'author function'. Foucault's distinction is potentially useful for my project in embedding the act of literary creation within a broader institutional context that determines how it circulates and how it is received.

Towards a Dialogic Approach

Writing in 1980, Tompkins noted the powerful stranglehold that formalist theory retained over institutional practice in English departments. She lamented that: 'In the long perspective of critical history, virtually nothing has changed as a result of what seems, from

close up, the cataclysmic shift in the focus of meaning from the text to the reader' (1980:223–225). But I would argue that there is also a danger in attempting to break away from one 'walled city' only to find yourself in a different one. Pursuing a theory of reader-response to its logical end (and in particular a theory which was rarely empirically tested beyond the confines of the academy) may well lead you to a standpoint of polar opposition to New Criticism's reification of the text: a reification of the reader that blocks any conception of a guiding narrative or a skilled and subtle narrator. Like the modernist conception of the art novel as a 'pure' form, produced by the struggling artist for the highest purposes and uncontaminated by the messy realities of the literary market, such privileging of a single standpoint is a fallacy. The creation, the consumption and the interpretation of the novel are complex processes – and the most informative critical response is a dialectical one. I prefer, with Jauss, to see reading as a process informed by engagement with the reader's reading past. I see writing in the same way, as a dialectical engagement with the writer's previous writing and the writer's previous reading. I aim to understand the process of literary production and consumption as a dialectical one, in which texts, readers, authors and critics are in constant dialogue and constantly shifting each other's perspective. Since Tompkins made her argument in 1980, there have been significant changes in the academic and public discussion of literature, enabling and embedding a more dialogic approach.

Rhetorical Reader-Response Criticism

How might the gap between the text-dominated accounts of narratology and the reader-dominated accounts of reader-response theory or of Barthes' poststructuralism be bridged? I alluded earlier to the tradition of rhetorical criticism associated with Booth, Rabinowitz and Phelan. The central contention of Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961] 1983) is encapsulated in a line from Henry James, quoted as an epigraph: 'The author makes his readers, just as he makes his characters.' Booth understands all narrative as a form of rhetoric, though he argues this does not necessarily imply calculation on the part of the author. He proposes that 'the success of an author's rhetoric does not depend on whether he thought about his readers as he wrote; if "mere calculation" cannot ensure success it is equally true that even the most unconscious and Dionysian of writers succeeds only if he makes us join in the dance.'(1983:xiv) For Booth, every text implies an author and it is the communication between writers and readers that is the driving force of narrative:

> [N]othing the writer does can be finally understood in isolation from his effort to make it all accessible to someone else – his peers, himself as imagined reader, his audience. The novel comes into existence as something communicable, and the means of communication are not shameful intrusions unless they are made with shameful ineptitude. (1983:397)

Booth isolates three specific ways in which the reader seeks clarification, or resolution in any text, and thus three ways in which the author can direct the interest of the reader. These are intellectual (a search for the truth), qualitative (a desire for aesthetic satisfaction) and practical (a human desire to seek satisfaction in terms of the outcomes for the characters.) He suggests that it is hard to conceive of a 'great work' that relies for its effects on only one of these areas of interest: 'for good or ill, we all seem convinced that a novel or play which does justice to our interest in truth, beauty, and in goodness is superior to even the most successful "novel of ideas"'(1983:133). On this view, every narrative choice, imparting meaning to the text and formulating the reading experience, is a result of the craft of the author: 'The artist must choose, consciously or unconsciously. To write one kind of book is always to some extent a repudiation of other kinds. And regardless of an author's professed indifference to the reader, every book carves out from mankind those readers for which its peculiar effects were designed.' (1983:136)

The Rhetoric of Fiction first introduces terms such as 'the implied author', 'the postulated reader' and the unreliable narrator' into the critical lexicon. Booth expanded this lexicon in an epilogue to the second edition of the book in 1983, in which he typologises understandings of the author into categories including 'the flesh-and-blood author', 'the implied author', 'the teller of this tale', 'the career author'. He categorises audiences with similar precision: 'the flesh-and-blood creator of many stories', 'the public myth', 'the career reader', the credulous listener and the (so-called) 'reading public'. These distinctions are helpful since, as we will see, reader-response theory is often curiously imprecise in its definition of the reader.

In *Reading for the Plot* (1992) Brooks offers an extended psychoanalytic account of the dynamics of narrative, considering how central elements of plot respond to the reader's psychic needs. He draws on Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1922) to model the trajectory of the non-narratable existence, stimulated into a condition of narratability, entering a state of deviance or detour (through desire, or ambition for example) before finally returning to the condition of the non-narratable. He distinguishes his psychoanalytic account of narrative from the *psychogenesis* of the text, (i.e. the author's unconscious

motivations) and from the dynamics of reader response. Though Brooks' account is avowedly text-focused rather than reader focused, his claim is not unrelated to Holland's principle that readers react to literary texts with the same psychological responses they bring to everyday events. He also rejects the discourse of narratology (though he employs some of its tools) arguing that it 'has too much neglected the temporal dynamics that shape narratives in our reading of them, the play of desire in time that makes us turn pages and strive towards narrative ends.' (1992:xiii). Brooks describes the 'tenuous, fictive, arbitrary status of ends' in the postmodern novel which speak of 'an altered situation of plot, which no longer wishes to be seen as end-determined' (1992:314). Yet he argues that even in the most experimental narrative fiction plot remains. The role of the ending is of particular interest to Brooks: he describes the *anticipation of retrospection* as the reader's chief tool in making sense of narrative. For Brooks: 'We have no doubt forgone eternal narrative ends, and even traditional nineteenth-century ends are subject to self-conscious endgames, yet still we read in a spirit of confidence, and also a state of dependence, that what remains to be read will restructure the provisional meanings of the already read.' (1992:23). One problem with Brooks' account is that at no point does he discuss precisely who the 'we' in his account refers to. His Freudian reading suggests he is dealing in universals, though the critical sophistication he ascribes to the reader of postmodern fiction (*'We* have, in a sense, become too sophisticated as readers of plot quite to believe in its orderings'(1992:314 – emphasis mine)) suggest that he has in mind the critic as reader, approximating the ideal reader.

Phelan's project (1982; 1989a; 1989b; 1996; 2005) is to outline a rhetorical theory of narrative, drawing both on the insights of the Chicago School (e.g., Booth) and on reader-response theory. His stated aim is to develop a model to explain how fiction is able to extend, challenge and change what we know, think, believe and value. He is one of the few critics to offer a theory of the relationship between author agency, textual phenomena and reader response in the experience of fiction. In *Reading People, Reading Plots* (1989a) Phelan builds on the distinctions set up by David Richter in *Fable's End* to examine how novelists signal endings to readers using signs of *closure* and signs of *completeness*. In Phelan's account, signs of closure signal the end of the conditions of a novel's action or of its occasion of narration (e.g. a return to the place where the action began). Completeness is a distinct narrative feature, offering a resolution of the instabilities of the plot that may be found in marriage for example. In modernist novels Phelan suggests that completeness is more likely to involve an internal change in the protagonist. A coda may follow the

resolution of the plot, offering a comment by the author, which may seek to alter the audience's understanding of what has passed. Though Phelan suggests that in most fictions signs of closure will precede completeness, and neither is likely to coincide precisely with the end of the narrative: he does give the example of a work of modernist fiction, Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) in which he argues that closure, completeness and the end of the novel coincide in the final sentence. (Phelan 1989a:174)[14] In a later book, *Experiencing Fiction* (2007), Phelan's central argument is that the experience of literature does not differ fundamentally from reader to reader. His claim is that the power of fictional narrative becomes apparent when we recognise the role played by the author's strategy and narrative structure in our intellectual, emotional, aesthetic and ethical response to the are central text. He suggests that reading practice has two central aspects – judgements and progressions – that are central to the possibility of shared experience because they are closely tied to the concept of narrativity. He employs different types of fictional narrative to reveal how they employ judgements and progressions to affect our experience. His examples include books with a high degree of narrativity, and books which synthesize narrativity with lyricality or portraiture (characterisation). Even in the latter, Phelan shows how effective a skilled writer can be with progression and judgement and he demonstrates how his model could be extended to metafiction. In *Experiencing Fiction* Phelan lays out a detailed model of narrative progression in which the beginning, middle and ending of the narrative each have four different aspects. In each case, two aspects are ascribed to the narrative and textual dynamics, while two aspects to readerly dynamics. The aspects he ascribes to endings are exposition/closure and arrival (textual dynamics); farewell and completion (readerly dynamics). Exposition/closure is related to information about the action, the characters or the narrative that includes some sign that the narrative is coming to a conclusion: this may be signalled, for example, by a character reaching the end of an appointed journey. Arrival refers to the resolution of the instabilities and tensions of the novel. Farewell is Phelan's term for the concluding exchanges between the 'implied author', the narrator and the reader. This may sometimes involve a direct address to the reader but whether it does or not, he argues that final exchanges always have the potential to affect the reader's response to the entire narrative. Completion is the conclusion of the reader's evolving response to the narrative, including the ethical and aesthetic judgements of the text.

14 The sentence is: 'After a while I went out and left the hospital and walked back to the hotel in the rain.' (Hemingway 1929).

Limitations of Reader-Response Theories

While Phelan acknowledges the centrality of the reader, he is most interested in what readers have in common in their experience of narrative, not in the question of how reading may differ across space and time or across class, gender and ethnic divides. As we might expect, those reader-response critics who retain a notion of the centrality of the text are more likely to stress the uniformity of response of the 'typical' reader. This is particularly true of Iser and Jauss's work on reception aesthetics (though as we have seen, Jauss is interested in how this common experience shifts over time), both of whom are very much *theorists* as opposed to *practitioners* of reader response, relying on the notion of an 'implied' reader or even an 'ideal reader', conjured by the text, rather than observed in the world. As we have seen, the work of many American reader-response critics, including Bleich, Holland and Fish go beyond theoretical reflection to adopt methodologies of practice, and this practice-led aspect of their work informs a more individualist perspective than that of Iser or Jauss. Holland argues for the 'unique identity' of each reader in driving their reading experience, describing his theory of reading as a 'personal transaction'. His book *5 Readers Reading* (1975) is based on case studies of five of his students and their free-association responses to literary texts. In the 1970s, with colleagues at SUNY, Buffalo, Holland developed this free association technique into a teaching method known as The Delphi Seminar. In similar vein, Bleich drew on ten years of pedagogic practice of his subjective reader-response methodology to inform his theory of reading in *Subjective Criticism* (1978). This American, individualist school of reader response has spawned continuing research, reflected in the fifty-year history of journals such as *Reading Research Quarterly*. However, though this research made a significant contribution in the pedagogic practice of English departments, its empirical rigour as an exemplar of the reading experience is circumscribed by the relatively homogenous 'interpretive community' of a classroom of literature students, most of a similar age, level of educational attainment and life experience.

Many of the reader-response critics of the 1960s and 1970s were openly hostile to an experimental approach to reader-research. The structuralist critic Jonathan Culler warned of 'the dangers of an experimental or socio-psychological approach which would take too seriously the actual and doubtless idiosyncratic performance of individual readers' (1975:258). Since the late 1980s there has been a growing movement towards a more

scientific culture of reader research based on experimental psychology (e.g. Gerrig 1993; Miall 2006). There has also been some empirical investigation of endings in literature. Brewer (1985) conducted an investigation of Shklovsky's notion of 'false endings', presenting readers with a story in three different versions and asking them to rate their attitude to the text's sense of 'completeness'. Lohafer (2003) conducted an empirical experiment with 180 readers studying their ability to read signs of closure in short stories. Klauk, Köppe and Weskott (2016) argued that narrative closure is primarily a reception phenomenon (dependent on readers having the impression that the plot of a narrative has ended) and is thus an interesting topic for empirical study, but one hampered by the difficulty of directly measuring the phenomenon of narrative closure. They conducted a study using a controlled rating experiment to seek empirical correlates of some of the properties of narrative closure, considering seven categories of closure drawn from the narratological literature. The study revealed that the two closest correlates of closure for their control group were 'completeness' and 'no further questions'. The article was framed by an acknowledgment that narratologists might not be prepared to accept the findings since they 'typically are not interested in just any reader's reaction, but tend to (implicitly) think in terms of informed or even ideal readers'. The authors reassured readers that 'we took care that our test subjects were experts that understood the texts well and, given their competence, did not seem to have any problems with the experimental task. They may therefore be considered close to informed or even ideal readers.' (2016:40).

This was a limited, quantitative study, producing statistical data rather than the qualitative data I seek, it was explicitly, confined to a homogenous interpretive community similar to those studied by US reader-response critics and it was monologic, whereas I seek a dialogic approach. However, the development of scientific studies of both reader response and narrative closure in recent years is indicative of a growing interest in empirically-aware, outwardly focused studies of literature and its reception, providing a new scholarly context for my study.

Beyond the 'Ideal' Reader

In *Reading the Romance* (1984) Janice Radway seeks to 'move beyond the various concepts of the inscribed, ideal, or model reader and to work with actual subjects in history' (1991:5). Her work draws on reader-response criticism, especially Fish's notion of

interpretive communities. Her research subjects are a geographically coherent and relatively socially homogenous group of women reading Romance novels in a small Midwestern town, to which she gives the pseudonym of Smithton, a location that Radway stresses is two thousand miles away from the New York publishing industry where 'books are readied for publication […] by young women with master's degrees in literature.' (1991:46). In other words, Radway is studying a non-elite group, unconnected to the literary world. While this has precedents in audience research, it is very unusual in literary studies.

Radway's methodology is anthropological, influenced by audience research and underpinned with feminist psychology. Her argument is that literary production and consumption are complex social processes and that ethnographies of reading should become 'a essential and necessary component of a multiply-focused approach that attempts to do justice to the ways historical subjects understand and partially control their own behaviour while recognizing at the same time that such behavior […] [is] complexly determined by the social formation within which those subjects find themselves.'(1991:5). She does not argue that ethnography should replace textual interpretation but that the two should run in parallel, one illuminating an objective cultural reality, the other revealing the more subjective experience of readers. Radway's focus on reading as a complex social event extends to a discussion of the structures that support it. She includes an investigation of the publishing industry and its role in creating and responding to the market for romance and the commercial strictures that bind it.

Interpretive Communities in the Literary Industry

It is clear that, in terms of the reception of contemporary literature, particular interpretive communities disproportionately influence the reception of the novel, its designation as literary, its potential prize-worthiness, its likely sales and its long-term influence. Those interpretive communities are not, in general, based in the academy. They are based around the literary industry, whether we are talking about those early industry readers who influence both the creation of the literary work and its 'positioning' within the literary marketplace, or those critical readers who review it, interview the author at literary festivals and judge it for literary prizes. My research goes directly to these powerful groups, but also to another group, perhaps less considered in terms of their literary influence:

members of reading groups around the country who buy, borrow, consume and argue over books. Reading group members are not 'ideal' readers – they may or may not be 'informed' readers, but they are certainly influential interpretive communities of readers. They are responsible for word-of-mouth successes and for ensuring the long-term appeal of work that the literary industry may have disregarded. Writers of contemporary fiction cannot usually rely on academic appraisal of their work in establishing a career: it typically comes years too late. They need to navigate the interpretive communities of the literary shapers of the industry and the literary public.

The reception and consumption of literary fiction is increasingly a social event: social media has enabled growing reader engagement with books in the form of reviewing sites and book blogs; literary festivals, readings and book signings are an expected part of an author's role; university creative writing departments flourish. Most authors would acknowledge too that they do not work in isolation; their literary production is negotiated within the context of the literary industry. Not only readers, but agents, editors and critics have a strong investment in the creative processes of narrative. It is with this in mind that I hope to make an 'outward-facing' contribution to the well-trodden theoretical terrain I have outlined. I do not believe that fictional endings, or indeed any narrative feature can be properly explained without a consideration of its effects on the audience. Nor do I believe that a sustained engagement with the 'ideal reader' is likely to be as informative as an analysis of the actual experience of readers. I want to make the argument for a more dialectical relationship between reader and text than that found in either the narrative theory literature or the reader-response literature, and one that is attentive to the institutional context of that relationship.

Situating the Thesis

Ethnographic research on the reception of popular cultural genres has followed Radway's landmark study, yet there is still relatively little research on literary fiction that embraces the hybrid methodology that she outlines. In a 2009 interview Radway reflected on the reasons why her 'hybrid methodology' had not become more established in English departments:

> I think […] it's because of the discipline. People in literary studies don't have the funding sources to underwrite that kind of fieldwork, they feel they don't have the

> training, and so they tend to be more text-oriented. In many ways, the reader orientation has been taken up more in historical studies of reading, so that in the history of the book, there is lots of work on historical readers and how historical readers may have made use of particular kinds of texts. Maybe that's because archival research for people within literature is closer because it's text based still. (Glass 2009).

In contrast to Radway's geographically and socially embedded study, Jenny Hartley's survey of reading groups (2001) surveys 350 groups across the UK and globally, recording who belongs to the groups, how they are run, what they read and how discussions are conducted. Group responses to particular novels are discussed, but used to illustrate group dynamics rather than to enrich understandings of the work in question. Hartley's work records a dynamic network, committed to reading, open to a wide variety of reading matter and highly motivated to discuss their thoughts on it. Like Radway's, Hartley's groups 'breathe at a healthy distance from a professional world of writing and reviewing'; they are 'a sort of self-appointed fifth estate, reading groups enjoy taking on the fourth estate of the media.'(2001:156) She argues that these groups are responsive audiences for writers, they provide word of mouth recommendations on new books and they help to keep publishers' backlists alive. Further studies on reading groups have followed, including Long's participant observations of US book clubs (2003) and David Peplow's work using Conversation Analysis to examine the discourse of reading groups (2016; Peplow et al 2015). Peplow draws on Phelan's work in narratology to examine readers' mimetic responses to fiction, though his concentration is on how readers identify with the narrative world through character, rather than their responses to narrative form.

Literary Studies has periodically produced institutional studies of the fiction industry, from Q. D. Leavis's *Fiction and the Reading Public* in 1932, to Sutherland's *Fiction and the Fiction Industry* (1978), and Todd's work on the Booker Prize in *Consuming Fictions* (1992).
In recent years, there has been a clamour of voices calling both for the integration of what Eaglestone (2013) calls a 'contemporary history of the book' into literary studies and for the embedding of a more sociological approach to literary institutions. McGurl (2010) argues that 'to see itself reflected in the mirror of sociology will allow literary studies to rediscover the institutionalism which it practices everywhere except in the critical arguments that it makes, where institutions so often function as the enemy'; while Malik (2008) argues that publishing precedes writing and governs the possibilities of reading, challenging scholars from both literary studies and contemporary book studies to integrate

their interests. Though such pronouncements have been heard, only a handful of scholars to date have done the work of bringing institutional perspectives into close literary study. They include Eve (2016) who maps the tensions between academic literary study and the fiction industry, both theoretically and in close readings of work by Sarah Waters and Jennifer Egan; and Brouillette (2014) who examines the workings of the creative economy and its impact on the institution of literature, with readings from Monica Ali and Aravind Adiga. In *Marketing Literature* (2007) Squires presents case studies of novels by Zadie Smith, David Mitchell and others, but hers is a contextual study rather than a textual one: she is concerned with publishing practice and its effects on readers but she does not take this back into the space of literary creation.

Rich data on authorial practice is available in the form of author interviews about their own work, which are widely used in contemporary literary studies. In Chapter One I traced a history of modernist engagement with the practice of literary creation, with contributions from James, Conrad and Forster. This remains a rich seam: it encompasses reflective books, memoirs and anthologies on writing practice (e.g. Atwood 2003; Lodge 2011 and, on the practice of beginnings and endings specifically, Burns 2007) and practical creative writing manuals aimed at beginning writers and students of creative writing (e.g. Gardner 1983 and 1991; King 2001). The development of Creative Writing in the academy as a research discipline as well as a teaching one has led to a burgeoning literature on the theory of critical practice, centred around contributions combining new writing with critical reflection on its process and practice. The field encompasses books (e.g. Boulter 2007; Brophy 2008) and research journals including *Writing in Practice: The Journal of Creative Writing Research* and *New Writing: International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*. The NAWE Research Benchmark Statement (2018) reports that critical works on creative practice may be 'connected to, combined with, embedded within, or stand relatively free from the practice that informs them. However, there is usually at least a symbiotic link between the two; they are often in dialogue with one another and in effect pose questions which are reciprocally addressed.' (2018:n.pag.). One example of separate, but complementary outputs is Grenville's novel *The Secret River* (2006) and her book-length reflection on its writing in *Searching for the Secret River* (2007). Alongside such critical reflections on creative practice, there is a growing methodological literature on research methods in creative writing (e.g. Dean and Smith 2009; Kroll and Harper 2012; Webb 2015). The focus in the NAWE Statement on critical reflection about creative practice

also points outwards to a broader literature on experiential learning and reflective practice (e.g. Dewey 1925; Kolb 1984; Schön 1984).

While there is an established scholarly literature on the practice of textual editing of literary work (e.g. Cohen 1991; Fraistat and Flanders 2013) critical reflection on the practice of selecting and editing work by contemporary authors is rare. Greenberg (2018:v) notes: 'our view of those who perform acts of editing is unclear or fragmented. The specific role becomes lost in larger identities; analysis of the practice is scattered across academic disciplines'. In terms of reflections from the publishing industry, there are entertaining memoirs by celebrated publishers (e.g. Athill 2001; Maschler 2005), which tend to focus more on personalities than editing practice. In recent years there have been a number of informative qualitative studies of selection and editing practices from the field of publishing studies, including Thompson (2010), Greenberg (2015), Squires (2017) and Henningsgaard (2019), though these are primarily concerned with institutions and structures rather than what Greenberg sees as the 'poetics of editing'.

In arguing for the development of a field of Editing Studies Greenberg notes that 'theory alone is not enough; one can learn by doing, and theory needs to be tested against some kind of external reality if it is to have meaningful explanatory power. But practice alone is not enough either; reflection and feedback are needed to put action into a wider context.' (2015:177). A similar ambition propels this thesis, to learn about how endings are conceived, constructed and experienced in practice but also to critically reflect upon those practical perspectives. In the methodology chapter that follows I set out how I put this aim into practice. My particular interest in this study is in providing a joined-up account of endings, with contextual perspectives ranging across the fields of creation, production and reception and putting all three into dialogue with literary-critical perspectives on narrative form. Childress's *Under the Cover* (2017) has the simple but brilliant organising strategy of following a single novel through these processes, thus linking three fields of cultural sociology that are almost always studied separately. As a sociological reflection on the creative practices of both author and publisher and of the consumer practices of the book industry and of readers, the relationship of Childress's book to Nixon's is not dissimilar to the relationship between Grenville's novel and her reflection on its creation, discussed above. However, Childress's external perspective allows him to investigate the collaborative processes involved in the creation of a book as a craftwork as well as an

artwork and the effects this has on its consumption and reception. I turn to his account in more detail in Chapter Seven, as a framework for analysing the qualitative data I present in the chapters that follow.

Chapter Three – Methodology: Researching Authors, the Literary Industry and Readers

Research Aims

The overall aim of the empirical research was to obtain rich interview data concerning:

a. The significance of endings with respect to the experience of writing fiction. How do authors construct endings and how is this construction influenced through liaison with agents, editors and the literary public?
b. The significance of endings for agents and editors in informing selection and in the process of working with authors to develop the work for reception and sale within the literary marketplace
c. The salience of endings in what makes for a successful novel, in aesthetic and commercial terms and in terms of literary prizes
d. The contribution of endings to the experience of reading fiction, with consideration to the different experience of professional readers and 'ordinary' readers, and the differences between individual reading and group reading
e. The salience of endings in distinguishing 'literary' fiction from other genres.
f. The descriptive language used by creators, producers and consumers of literary fiction to describe endings

The research design entailed and enabled a reconstruction of the practices of reasoning and of the styles of critical reflection on the novel exhibited by authors, literary professionals and readers. A secondary aim of the research was to inform the development of a corpus of recent novels with endings that were in some way considered noteworthy by my interview subjects. Some of these books are discussed within Part Two; a smaller number of them are taken forward into the close reading chapters in Part Three.

Research Design

The empirical research follows a chronological trajectory, tracing the journey of the book from the writer, through the agent and publisher, and into the hands of both professional readers, i.e. the critics and literary prize juries who offer their professional judgements, and 'ordinary readers' who read the book and may share their views at book groups or on

popular reviewing sites. This trajectory suggested the need for three discrete research cohorts and a careful consideration of the most appropriate research method/s for investigating each of them.

The first stage of the research comprised qualitative semi-structured interviews with novelists discussing both their published work and their work in progress. My aim was to understand how authors conceive their endings, how they write towards the ending and how they revise it for publication. What, for authors, are the major formal challenges and how have they negotiated them? I also wanted to gain a sense of the influence of discussions with agents and publishers around endings and to investigate how novelists conceive of their readers as they write.

The second stage of the research comprised semi-structured interviews with members of the literary industry. Like Radway (1984), I was interested in the structures that support the complex social process of literary production and consumption and the influence that has on endings, but I was also interested in the creative role of individual literary agents and editors. I thus planned interviews with literary agents, publishers of literary fiction and literary journalists/critics who have served as prize-judges for one of the UK's major literary prizes.

With both of these groups I chose the semi-structured interview as the most appropriate methodology, for three key reasons. First, it was a methodology I knew that my subjects would understand and feel comfortable with. Novelists are public figures and are often interviewed about their work; literary journalists conduct those interviews. Though, as we saw in the preceding chapter, editors and agents are more rarely interviewed for publication, since they work with authors, they are habituated to an interview culture and they may also participate in public events regarding their editorial practice. Second, the semi-structured interview is a form suited to gathering complex, descriptive data about individual experiences, social and institutional processes and the relationship between them. Mason (2002:1) lists four areas that the qualitative interview can probe in a way other methods cannot: 'the texture and weave of everyday life, the understandings, experiences and imaginings of research participants, the ways that social processes, institutions, discourses or relationships work, and the significance of the meanings that they generate.'

Third, previous research on publishing practice had been successfully conducted using semi-structured interviews: e.g. Thompson (2010), Greenberg (2015), Squires (2017), Henningsgaard (2019). In the introduction to *Editors Talk about Editing*, Greenberg notes that the semi-structured interview is a middle ground between the 'purposeful' interviewee-led conversation and the highly-structured questionnaire and that, with a common set of questions to guide the agenda 'it is a mix that provides both adaptability and consistency' (2015:9). Of his extensive research with publishers for *Merchants of Culture* Thompson explains 'I always went into interviews with a structured set of topics and questions, tailored to the individual and organization concerned, but I never treated this plan as fixed: I allowed the conversation to flow in different directions depending on the interests and experiences of the interviewee'. (2010:408). Like Thompson and Greenberg, I approached interviews with a common set of questions, adapted to a certain extent to fit the interests and backgrounds of the subject, but I anticipated that some interviews (especially those with novelists) might range more widely. The questions that structured my interviews are available in Appendices 1 and 2. They were designed to elicit responses to the central research questions above, concerning the role and place of endings in the contemporary literary novel and how they are developed through the process of writing and editing, but it was clear to me that these questions were unlikely to be adequately addressed without posing wider questions about my interviewees' creative and professional practice. My aim in the research was not simply to provide answers to questions, but rather to reconstruct the space of imagination and the processes of reflection, reasoning and valuing within which their framing of and judgements concerning endings takes place. This tallies with Mason's observation that: 'Most qualitative research operates from the perspective that knowledge is situated and contextual, and therefore the job of the interview is to ensure that the relevant contexts are brought into focus so that situated knowledge can be produced.' (2002:62.) Additionally, I asked all participants questions about their reading habits and preferences regarding endings. I felt that it was important to understand both writers and publishers also as readers, indeed as part of an 'interpretive community' that has a role in shaping culture and influencing literary taste.

The third stage of the research was with book groups in the UK and beyond. As discussed in Chapter Two, I was concerned to move beyond the 'informed' or 'ideal' reader of reader-response theory who, in Culler's words (1975) has obtained the 'literary competence' necessary to experience the text. Thus, in addition to engaging with writers and publishers

as readers, I wanted to find a way of engaging with the responses of 'ordinary' readers, whether 'competent' or not, since it is their experience that governs the success or failure of a novel (at least in the short to medium term). I considered the possibilities of conducting survey research among individual readers, or of surveying audiences at readings and literary festivals. I felt that there were disadvantages with both constituencies and, given my interest in Radway's notion of reading as a social event, it seemed more relevant to the aims of the project to delve into the reading constituency described by Hartley: organized groups, not in the pocket of the industry, who read alone but meet to make their voices heard. Reading groups share some of the characteristics of the 'public-facing' literary audience found at readings and festivals, but the latter tends to be an elite, generally urban group with stronger connections to the industry. Participants are usually already fans of the particular writers they are going to see, while reading group participants start from a position of open-minded enquiry and – Hartley makes clear – frequently enjoy discussions of novels they have not rated highly more than those they have. Prior to their group discussions, reading group members are, of course, also individual readers, so my methodology combined elements of the study of private reading and public engagement with literature. Some members may also participate in more public engagement, attending readings, posting reviews of books on social media, but this is not a condition of their participation in the group. Importantly using reading groups as my focus also negotiated the practical research problems that interviewing large numbers of individuals would generate within the constraints of my research.

I planned a mixed-methods study for this element of the research. The first element was a questionnaire for already established-book groups (available as Appendix 5), designed to be answered either collectively by the group at one of their meetings, or by one member on behalf of the group. The second element was participant observation and focus groups amongst a smaller number of groups geared at obtaining a deeper understanding of the dynamics and discourse of the group, a detailed reflection on tastes and preferences regarding endings and a richer response to individual texts. The questionnaire invited respondents to contact me if they were willing for me to participate in their group: on the basis of this invitation and the quality of responses to the questionnaire, I selected four groups to visit. The questionnaire requested basic sociological data, to allow me to understand the nature of the 'interpretive community' I was investigating and also to enable me to represent as broad a reading community as possible, with participants of varying age, education, social and professional background. Group visits had two elements.

First, I engaged as a participant–observer at one of the group's regular meetings; second I conducted brief focus groups, immediately following the group meetings, at which I asked specific questions about how participants understood 'endings', what they wanted an ending to do and books with endings they had admired or disliked. I undertook the participant observations before the focus groups in order to record a group meeting in as natural as environment as possible, but then to allow group members the space to think reflectively about their everyday participation. In this, my research design replicated the reader-response method of Bleich, with his two-stage process of asking participants to record their responses to a text and then to analyse their response.

Survey research is generally thought of as a quantitative methodology, geared to obtaining large scale public opinion data, for example. My use of it as a methodology to uncover qualitative information about reading practices, was inspired by Radway's work on romance readers (1984) and Hartley's work on reading groups (2001), both discussed in Chapter Two. Radway's research combined a questionnaire sent to limited participants (she records 42 responses) with ethnographic research, while Hartley's was based primarily on a larger number of questionnaire responses (350) and a smaller number of visits to groups. Hartley did extract statistical information from the questionnaires, but she also used them qualitatively – effectively as interview data, offering a thematic analysis of a range of extracts. This element of Hartley's study was extremely effective. It enabled the distinctive voices and opinions of questionnaire respondents to be heard and understood within a structured format and it is this element of her methodology that I draw on in Chapter Six. My use of participant observation is more conventional: it is a method used by ethnographic researchers who want to 'get inside the fabric of everyday life', as Silverman (2011:113) puts it. At its heart it is about focusing on the ordinary activities of the group under observation, concentrating on what they actually say and do rather than on the way they frame those actions when asked directly by an interviewer (Silverman 2011:118). It is frequently used in organisational research, whether of large organisations such as universities or trade unions, or small groups – which might include youth clubs, or indeed reading groups. The purpose of focus group research is rather different. Morgan (1988) argues that focus groups excel at uncovering why people think as they do, allowing moderators to unpick the process by which views are formed during the meeting. My aim was to uncover the group's reading preferences and reading experiences as well as the formative reading that shapes their responses to the literary work they encounter. Flick

(2007:xvii) suggests that focus groups are particularly suited for integration into a multiple methods design with other qualitative methods and that they are a strong alternative to using single interviews since they not only allow analysis of statements and reports about experiences and events, but they also allow analysis of the interactional context in which these statements and reports are produced. Rosaline Barbour (2007:2) notes that they are also a strong alternative to group interviews, since they generate interaction between participants rather than requiring the same question to be asked to each participant in turn – thus providing richer data, with the benefits of both individual views and group interaction, each of which impacts on the other. Barbour further notes that focus groups tend to encourage the participation of individuals who might otherwise feel they have little to contribute to an academic research project.

Selection of Participants

As is typical in qualitative research, practical considerations have necessitated relatively small sample sizes in each element of this project. Mason (2002:134) notes that qualitative methods are generally used 'when the object of study is some form of social process or meaning or experience which needs to be understood or explained in a rounded way'. The central questions for the researcher are not about the size of the sample but about the basis of selection and whether the sample provides access to enough data, with the right focus, to address the central research questions.

The novelists interviewed for the project were Natasha Carthew, Claire Fuller, Jon Courtenay Grimwood, Mick Jackson, Wyl Menmuir, Barney Norris and Imogen Robertson. With a small group of interviewees, it is evidently not possible to be *representative*, thus I aimed to sample *strategically*. Mason (2002:123) notes that strategic sampling aims to produce 'a relevant rage of contexts or phenomena, which will enable you to make strategic and possibly cross-contextual comparisons, and hence build a well-founded argument.' I aimed for an *indicative* selection of interviewees, designed to encapsulate a relevant range rather than represent it directly. The novelists selected for the project are of varying age, gender, background and writing experience, and they publish with a range of different publishing outlets from imprints of one of the 'Big Five' multinationals[15], to midsize literary independents (e.g. Faber & Faber), to small presses (e.g. Salt Publishing).

15 Hachette, HarperCollins, Macmillan, Penguin Random House, Simon & Schuster.

One of the underlying questions of my project is what makes the literary industry badge a novel as 'literary fiction', and the role that endings play in that demarcation. I therefore chose to interview five authors whose work is primarily branded by the industry as literary fiction (Carthew, Fuller, Jackson, Menmuir, Norris), one (Robertson) who is known for genre fiction – specifically historical crime fiction), and one (Grimwood) whose work straddles the industry's literary/genre divide in that he publishes science fiction and fantasy, thrillers and literary fiction under three different names, with different publishers. Biographical and bibliographical information on each novelist can be found in Appendix 1.

The publishing industry research draws on interviews with four literary agents and correspondence with a fifth, and on interviews with four editors and two literary prize judges. Agents interviewed were Lucy Luck (Conville & Walsh), Laura Williams (Peters Fraser and Dunlop),[16] Gordon Wise (Curtis Brown) and Bryony Woods (Diamond Kahn & Woods). Editors interviewed were Alessandro Gallenzi (Alma Books), Helen Garnons Williams (Fourth Estate), Juliet Mabey (Oneworld) and Alexandra Pringle (Bloomsbury). Literary prize judges were the journalist, book reviewer and novelist Sam Baker and the academic and writer, John Sutherland. All of the interviewees agreed to be named. It is relatively unusual for publishing research to use named participants: Thompson (2010) and Squires (2017) do not name their subjects; though Greenberg does, noting that 'identification helps address the invisibility of editing and match the attention given to (named) authors.'(2015:7). Since this chapter immediately follows a chapter based on interviews with (named) authors, I have, with the agreement of my interviewees, adopted the same principle. A second, practical, justification is that it is helpful to understand their views within the context of the publisher or agency they work for and the authors they work with: for example, two of the publishing interviewees work for literary independents, which have a distinctive character and identity that (as I discovered in the research) informs their literary production and their views on endings, while one of the literary agents had worked closely with one of the authors I interviewed and both parties discussed their collaboration. As with the author interviews, I aimed for what Mason describes as a 'meaningful range' of experience. The literary agents included both established agents handling large client lists of major literary figures and younger agents developing their lists and working to build the careers of promising debut novelists. The editors work for a range

16 Williams moved to Greene & Heaton after we met.

of publishers: the literary imprint of one of the 'Big Five', a large and distinguished independent publisher and two small, family-run literary independents. Of the prize judges, Sam Baker has judged the Costa Book Awards, The Desmond Elliot Prize, the Women's Prize for Fiction and The British Book Awards; the other, John Sutherland, has twice judged the Booker Prize, once as Chair of Judges. There is a public perception that the Man Booker prize favours 'difficult' novels, while the Costa prize is awarded to more accessible novels, valuing 'story-telling' above literary innovation and I was interested in the views of those who have judged these prizes on this distinction and on the role that endings play in it. In order to provide context for their reflections, I have included a professional biography of each interviewee in Appendix 3.

The reading groups included in the study were largely self-selecting. I sent links to a questionnaire on Google Docs via Social Media, tagging #bookclubs and #readinggroups and asking relevant organisations such as The Reading Agency to retweet. Links to the questionnaire were also sent to libraries and bookshops in order to gather a meaningful spectrum of responses. There was something of a snowball effect, with groups who had completed the questionnaire and participants in the author and literary industry research passing the questionnaire to their contacts in book groups. While the research was originally intended to be UK specific, the nature of social media dissemination led to responses from Australia and Canada as well as the UK. I received forty-three completed questionnaire responses from forty-one reading groups. Following receipt of the questionnaires, I selected four groups that had offered relatively fuller responses to the questionnaire and that reflected the overall make-up of the groups. One of these was a large mixed drop-in group at a branch of Waterstones bookshop, one was an all-female group for staff of the V & A Museum in London with a young membership; two were all-female village groups: one, in rural Hampshire a closed group with a twenty year history, and the other a library-affiliated group in Oxfordshire, open to new members. I engaged with these groups as a participant-observer (and attended one group twice in this role) in order to get a deeper understanding of how they operated in practice. At three of the groups I was able to conduct focus groups to discuss their responses in more depth (the fourth was time-limited as it was a lunchtime meeting at a workplace).

Conducting the Research

Author interviews were conducted between April 2017 and October 2018. A pilot interview for the literary industry study was conducted as far back as February 2015, in order to inform the original research proposal for the thesis, but the remaining ten literary industry interviews were conducted between March 2018 and December 2018, while the reading group research was carried out between October 2018 and March 2019. Interviews averaged an hour in length: with some of the author interviews considerably longer and some literary industry interviews rather shorter. There was one telephone interview; all the others were conducted face-to-face: those with literary industry professionals most commonly in their London offices and those with authors and literary prize judges in coffee shops. I attended four reading groups, one of them (Waterstones) on two occasions. The meetings varied from one hour (V & A) to two-and-a-half hours (North Hants No.1 Book Club).

Informed consent was obtained from all participants in the study. They were provided with an information sheet introducing the project and its research aims and the ways in which I proposed to gather and store the data. In the case of survey respondents, the questionnaire incorporated information on the project and a consent statement, assuring participants that all data would be password protected and their anonymity preserved. Interviewees were asked to sign a consent form, on which they could indicate whether they were willing to be named or preferred to be anonymous. In addition, Chapter Five quotes from personal correspondence with a literary agent with her permission.

A study drawing on the views of named participants requires assiduous ethical attention to ensure that the voices of interviewees reflect their views genuinely and without distortion. For this reason, with two exceptions where I was only able to take notes, interviews were recorded and transcribed. I was able to record one of the focus group sessions and one of the participant observation sessions; for the others, I relied on detailed notes for my reconstructions. I also followed the standard procedure for qualitative research in keeping a fieldwork journal during the research, recording my immediate observations and questions following the interviews and focus groups. These notes were especially helpful in informing my reconstructions of reading group visits in Chapter Six. Interview transcripts were very lightly edited to remove repetitions and some hesitancies. In the extracts quoted

bracketed ellipses show where some words have been removed, to ensure fluency and to allow the participants' meaning to emerge clearly. What I understood as an ethical responsibility to represent accurately the views and voices of named participants in the project, informed my decision in presenting the data, to quote participants' own words as much as possible rather than paraphrasing their positions. I felt it was central to this research project to record not only the views of participants, but their discourse: to allow them to speak in their own words. Within the three chapters in which research data is presented, my role as researcher is that of providing a perspicuous representation of the data: presenting a thematic organisation of my findings, explaining the themes and interpreting the data where possible. I do not subject the data to critical analysis or systematically compare data between groups until the concluding chapter (Chapter Seven), which brings the findings together and compares the perspectives and discourse of practitioner groups, with the critical voices outlined in Part One of the thesis.

Analysing the Data

The research generated an extensive dataset: 84,500 words of transcript from the author interviews; 76,500 from the literary industry interviews, 360 pages of book group questionnaires and nearly 22,000 words of transcripts and notes from the focus groups and participant observations, in addition to my field diaries and follow-up Email correspondence with participants. The major challenge of the research was to devise a way of understanding the patterning of the data. As Morley suggests, a researcher needs to do much more than simply generating 'interesting stories' (2006:101).

The dataset for each chapter was analysed separately. The author and literary industry chapters followed identical processes of inductive coding and thematic analysis. The reading group chapter, where the bulk of the data was from questionnaire responses supplemented by participant-observations and focus-group research, required a different approach. In working with the interview transcripts, the first stage was to familiarise myself with them through reading and rereading and as I did so to make notes on recurring patterns and themes. I ascribed codes to these notes before turning to the transcripts, in order to separate my understanding of authorial, or editorial practices from the descriptive language deployed by my subjects. I produced abridged versions of the transcripts to help with the selection of extracts to use in the chapters, guided partly by the principle,

suggested by Mason (2002:183), of prioritising constitutive (i.e. theory-building) examples over illustrative examples, but always aware that participants should be allowed to speak in their own voices, using their own vocabulary. Thus, memorable encapsulations of writing, editing and reading practices were retained as much as possible.

Mindful of the warning given by Coffey and Atkinson (1996) of the dangers of researchers using N-Vivo developing a 'coding fetish', involving too many detailed codes, I made the decision to code the transcripts manually rather than use coding software. First and second level codes were ascribed to all the data and third level codes were used where needed. In accordance with the inductive principles of Grounded Theory my aim was to base my analysis primarily on categories generated by participants. However, I also recognised that both the interviews and focus groups were based on questions I had written and put to the participants, while the questionnaire data was closely structured in the format I had designed. Melia (1997:27) notes that most researchers ultimately use a similarly 'pragmatic' version of Grounded Theory and Barbour (2007:127) recommends reflecting this in the coding framework by using a combination of *a priori* codes and *in-vivo* codes. In practice, the interpretive coding of author and literary industry interviews and focus group feedback was primarily though in-vivo codes (which Kelle (1997) describes as 'theories of members of the investigated culture'), as developed during the course of the research; while the questionnaire responses were interpreted using a priori codes. The in-vivo codes initially used terms employed by participants: for example, one of the original codes from the author interviews was 'the Eureka moment', referring to the point when the author reaches the ending of a first draft. However, since many interviewees used a distinctive creative vocabulary, in interpreting their meaning I ultimately found it more helpful to seek a generic label, such as the term 'critical affinity' used in the literary industry chapter to encapsulate practitioners' descriptions of an effective agent-author or editor-author relationship.

In working with the reading group data, the first stage was to separate and analyse the quantitative data (i.e. basic information on the size, location and composition of the groups studied). The former is not integral to the study but serves as context and is included as Appendix 6. The second step was to analyse the remaining questionnaire data qualitatively, using a priori codes based on the original construction of the questionnaire. However, to add to this data I had notes and recordings from the participant observations. This was, in

fact, the least structured of all the data. I coded it separately and it produced a series of distinct in-vivo codes, suggesting reading practices and responses I had not anticipated. I then took these codes back into the questionnaire data. For example, the coding of participant-observation data made it clear that group members like to provide evidence to verify the authenticity of fictional narratives. This became a second-level code and it informed a search for terms such as 'authenticity in storytelling', 'genuine historical detail' in the questionnaire data.

I based the structure of each chapter on the coding framework developed through this process of inductive coding. The task of writing-up the research findings was laborious in the case of the author and reading group chapters, requiring several drafts before the coding structure could be integrated into a coherent narrative framework that accurately reconstructed the patterns of thought and practice of the participants. In the case of the more structured data from the reading group participants, the coding framework immediately produced a coherent structure, enabling me to incorporate voices from the participant observations into the narrative and to draw out conclusions that incorporated themes from all three data sources.

Interpretation across the Data

The three chapters that follow offer an account of the production and consumption of the novel as essentially a 'craftwork' that may certainly emerge from an artistic imperative, but crucially also, is crafted for an audience, with the engagement of a literary industry that is in itself an 'interpretive community' of readers. It is an account that understands reading – whether professional or 'amateur' reading – as an intellectual, affective and sometimes visceral practice. In the introduction to the thesis I talked of separate, yet overlapping perspectives on endings from writing, editing, reading and criticism. As I argued in Part One, there is still a dearth of research that acknowledges the extent to which these perspectives can be and should be mutually informing. Thus, Section Two concludes with a chapter that attempts to brings together the knowledge generated from the separate 'group' chapters, in the light of some of the critical perspectives discussed in Part One. This concluding chapter has a different structure and methodology from the group chapters. It is underpinned by theory, drawing on Bourdieu's account of the autonomous and heteronomous principles in creative production and on Clayton Childress's model of the

relationship between the fields of creation, production, consumption and reception. It required a process of recoding, not of the raw data, but of the three empirical chapters themselves, aiming to draw out common themes and shared vocabularies to take into the close readings of Part Three of the thesis. I hope that a distinctive contribution of my study will be to shed light on the craft of the literary novel as a *conversation* between authors, publishers, readers and critics that continues well beyond the ending of the book.

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PART TWO: INVESTIGATING ENDINGS

Introduction to Part Two

In Part One I outlined some of the ways in which literary theory has conceptualised fictional endings and readers' responses to those endings. I discussed the way in which, at least since Henry James, endings have been one of the narrative features seen to have a role in delineating the boundaries of literary and mass-market fiction. Despite welcome attempts by literary theory to understand the effects of endings on readers, I found that existing critical perspectives were limited in not studying readers beyond the academy and by their failure to consider the institutional context in which contemporary fiction is produced, consumed and valued. I found that both of these areas have been addressed by contributions from publishing studies and book history, but that those perspectives have not fed back into studies of narrative, especially with regard to contemporary fiction. Of particular interest here is the twenty-first century democratisation of literary valuing indicated by the growth of public literary culture, reading groups and online book forums. Such changes have fuelled a debate around contemporary canon formation within a cultural climate in which, as Eve argues, we see 'the ongoing displacement of cultural authority away from university English' (2016:23). Eve regards it as now 'the *weaker relation* of the market gatekeeping system for literary fiction, of which publishers form the stronger, obverse side' (2016:21). As we saw in Chapter One, other commentators have theorised an alternative site of valuing in a new culture of the literary middlebrow which, for Driscoll is 'middle-class, reverential towards elite culture, entrepreneurial, mediated, feminized, emotional, recreational and earnest' (2014:6).

The three chapters that follow look at the ways in which fictional endings are conceived, discussed and valued outside the academy, from the perspective of the creators, producers and consumers of literary fiction. Chapter Four focuses on the creators, drawing on qualitative interviews with seven novelists. Chapter Five focuses on the producers, drawing on qualitative interviews with literary agents and publishing editors in their role as 'market-gatekeepers', curators and mediators in the process of bring a work to market and with literary prize judges as critical evaluators of the published work whose judgements have a role in determining how it is received. Chapter Six presents the responses of literary consumers, drawing on a mixed methods study of book groups. The actions and judgements of the first two groups have an inevitable bearing on critical response to contemporary fiction from the academy and on the creation of literary canons, since, as

Eve notes, publication is a precondition of canonisation. Novels must pass the 'market gate-keeping' of the literary industry before they are available for critical scrutiny (2016:23). For me, Driscoll's characterisation of such distinct 'practical' perspectives as middlebrow is problematic, but it is clear that they operate in distinct registers from that of the critical voices of 'university English' that characterise the responses of both narrative theorists and reader-response theorists addressed in my opening chapters. In this part of the thesis, my aim is to provide a 'thick description' of the forms of literary reasoning and valuing that characterise each of these groups. To this end, each chapter engages in a thematic analysis that allows the subjects of my research to speak in their own voices, before turning in the concluding chapter of this part to look at the institutional context of their reflections, working to draw out the salient features of their ways of reflectively engaging with literary productions from their distinct standpoints, and comparing these perspectives with one another and with insights from the critical literature.

Although my central research question concerns the place and role of endings in the contemporary literary novel, this question would not be adequately addressed by posing questions simply about endings, rather I am interested in reconstructing the space of imagination and the processes of reflection, reasoning and valuing within which my research subjects' conceptualisation of, and judgments concerning, the problem of endings takes place. In adopting this qualitative empirical research, my aim is not to 'debunk' the literary-theoretical traditions in which endings are considered, but to introduce these 'practical' perspectives to ask what might be added by taking them into account in thinking about the contemporary novel. More specifically I want to ask what addressing the role of endings in relation to the valuing of literary fiction in our contemporary context might offer to a more pluralistic literary theory of the contemporary novel. The distinction between 'theoretical' and 'practical' perspectives should not be seen as constructing a dichotomy but rather as marking a plurality of standpoints that may involve different interests and forms of critical reflectiveness within a literary institutional landscape that is, if not flattening out, then at least refiguring some of the traditional relations of authority in literary judgement. Since the analysis that I offer in the following chapters is based on limited samples, the findings reported must be viewed as indicative rather definitive; their role is to offer an initial exploration, not an exhaustive mapping, of the topic.

Chapter Four – Endings and Authors: The Craft of Closure

Introduction

This first empirical chapter considers the ways in which novelists develop a narrative structure, asking when the ending first appears, what it means to write an ending, how authors work with agents and editors to refine or 'negotiate' the ending, and how they think about their readers during the process. The aim of the chapter is to reconstruct the spaces of imagination and the forms of reasoning in which writers conceive and work towards an ending. It thus ranges beyond the processes of writing and editing to look at a broader set of contextual questions including how authors are located by the publishing industry with respect to genre and how that affects the ways in which they conclude their work and their work is edited.

The chapter begins by foregrounding an initial set of responses from interviewees discussing how they formulate the shape of their narrative and develop a sense of the ending. These excerpts point to some of the central themes to emerge from the interviews, including the balance of art and craft in the process of literary creation, the role of character and setting, intellectual and affective forms of resolution and aesthetic considerations including visual and musical resonances. While the chapter is primarily thematically organised, it also follows a broad trajectory of conception, writing, rewriting, editing and reception, concluding with an examination of the writer's responsibility to the reader.

Conceiving an Ending

> I have to visualise it. The first time I visualise the character, where she is and what's going on, as opposed to just writing notes about what's going to happen I'm like 'This is boring, that's boring.' And then all of a sudden it's like a stillness, there is calm and you just kind of know. And it is so visual, you can see! […] I Once you get it you're like 'Oh my God, that's it!'
> (Natasha Carthew)

> Obviously with crime it's kind of laid out for you […] you're going to begin with a body and you know that you're going to end with finding out, you know, whodunnit and why. And then you have the parallel track of finding out what led up to the murder and the track of the investigation, sort of weaving together

> hopefully, until you reach that sort of tie-off at the end. Mostly, before I start typing as opposed to researching, I know whodunnit.
> (Imogen Robertson)

> I just finished the first draft of the third book, and that's been very interesting in terms of endings because I knew the whole plot from the top. […] I think writing with an end in mind is a really lovely way of going about things, because you have this tractor beam all the time. [...] I talked to Michael Frayn about it and he said […] he thought of the whole plot of *Headlong* once, in an instant, looking at a painting, but every other novel he's ever done had to be reasoned issue by issue.
> (Barney Norris)

> When we're talking about an ending for a novel say and when it comes to me [...] instinctively I want to say it's pretty close to the beginning of the process. I wouldn't want to start really working [...] on the first draft of a novel without knowing pretty well where it is going to land.
> (Mick Jackson)

Both Carthew and Robertson use the period of research for the novel to establish a clear idea of where they are going before they begin the writing. While there is a distinction between Carthew's instinctive approach and Robertson's analytical one, further discussion suggested that it was not quite as clear-cut as the extracts above might suggest. Robertson noted: 'I might change my mind as to why as I go through. […] Obviously once you've got a character up and moving […] they will develop quite interesting characteristics on the page'; while Carthew (relatively unconstrained by the genre expectations Robertson described) also felt that 'the ending is to me the thing that comes first with my writing', noting that this was especially important in a novel with experimental form: 'It's good because structurally you always know where you're going even if you go all over the place.' Carthew described her ending as 'a little nugget at the end and you know it's there and then you have to dig for it'. She alluded to the early planning of her current work-in progress, describing 'a moment where I was like "This is it!" – and that's because of the ending. And so now I have to go right the way back and start thinking the story out again. Because it has to be that ending and I cannot change that now.'

Some novelists noted that their practice has shifted from book to book. *The Vanishing Hours* (2019) was Norris's only novel where the plot became clear to him in advance and in talking about Michael Frayn's reversion to a method of reasoning the plot 'issue by issue' he suggests that this would be his usual practice too. For Jon Courtenay Grimwood too, the 'story arc' of a novel came to him, fully formed, just once during his writing career: 'The

Last Banquet was literally written in one-line chapters on the side of a napkin, put in a notebook and kept for 15 years. [The published novel] fits exactly the synopsis that was written in a cafe all those years ago.' His usual practice seems to combine a moment of inspiration, like Carthew's, with Norris's 'issue by issue' reasoning:

> [T]he books begin with a single image. Sometimes the image is the last thing in the book. Sometimes it is the first thing in the book. Occasionally it's just in the middle of the book but it's always one single image and then I spend a lot of time teasing out what leads up to that image and what comes after that image, and that gives me the arc of the book – the story.

Mick Jackson's account suggests that he finds it helpful to have the sense of ending, or at least to have worked out the direction of travel towards one, as he starts writing, but his planning is different from analytical construction of plot, character and motive we find in Robertson's account. He focuses here on the writer's 'instinct' about the process, on 'knowing pretty well' rather than 'planning out' and on 'landing' rather than 'ending'. He later pointed to a disconnect between his ideal process and its pragmatic realisation:

> I find myself saying I'm one of those writers that needs to know, has to have these milestones right through the narrative, before I begin writing. Weirdly as I'm writing along now, and I'm doing the research and the development, I'm thinking actually that's not true. I don't know as much about the narrative and the plot beats and all the rest of it as I imagine I do, before I start writing, that I actually do formulate some of those things as I'm doing the first draft.

It seems a knowledge of where a story is going to 'land' is not the same as having the entire narrative arc formulated in advance. With *The Underground Man* (1997) Jackson recalled that 'I didn't know the specifics of the ending but I knew where I wanted my character to be […] geographically [and] in sort of emotional terms.' We find here a theme that several of the novelists referred to: the affective resonances of landing, which might include the sense that this is the end of a journey. Jackson noted that his desire for a 'landing' emerges from his conviction that 'character and situation creates narrative'. This relates to Natasha Carthew's account of conceiving the shape of her narrative by visualising the character: 'where she is and what's going on.' Both Carthew and Grimwood describe a process of visualisation, implying both an aesthetic sense of the ending and as a spatial one. The visual resonance of endings was mentioned by several respondents, as was their musical character. I will return to discuss both.

In contrast to the writers discussed above, Claire Fuller noted that she has very little sense of the narrative trajectory as she commences writing. She described feeling her way towards an ending: 'It just happens, and I let it happen. I don't work it out.' So far she has not known how one of her novels will end before she has written through to it, though she notes that 'with *Swimming Lessons* (2017), I knew at a certain point that Ingrid was going to disappear […] maybe I was two thirds of the way through and I decided that we'd never find out what happens to her. […] I had no more idea than that.' When she does get there, however: 'the ending has just come […] without me thinking "how's it going to end?" It just seems so logical!'

The Work of the Ending

It is not always clear from the extracts above what precisely is meant by an ending, in terms of either location or function. With respect to the former, Robertson discussed the relationship between two possible sites of ending: first, the resolution of the narrative tensions, second, the termination of the author's relationship with the reader:

> There's the consummation of the action and then there's the gently letting your reader go out into the world afterwards. […] The ending of a drama or the ending of an investigation is […] a full-blooded roar of an event and so then you need to sort of let everything settle, you need to answer the unanswered questions, you need to let your characters react, you need to give [the reader] a space to react to it.

Mick Jackson described a similar narrative shape, which he used for his third novel:

> There's this sort of convention with a novel […] where you've introduced the character and the situation. There's chaos, there are calamities and obstacles. Three quarters of the way through or just after there's this epiphany: bang! And with *The Widow's Tale* […] she has this epiphany of some sort, and she kind of breaks through momentarily, and it feels that there's a sort of peacefulness entering the novel, or some sort of acceptance about what she's done in the past and the loss of her husband. And after that there's a sort of epilogue. I would now say that's what happens: there's a sort of calamity and then there's sort of a settling down. It felt like that was quite a nice shape for that novel.

In other interviews, novelists explicitly referred to the language of the final sentence: Jon Courtenay Grimwood noted that 'endings are so incredibly hard to write […] in the sense

that it has to be the right sentence and sometimes the right sentence is really obvious and sometimes the right sentence takes ten, fifteen, twenty sentences before you have [it].'

In terms of function, in advance of our meeting, Grimwood reread the endings of his four favourite novels: *Fellaheen* (2003), *Stamping Butterflies* (2004), *End of the World Blues* (2006) and *The Last Banquet* (2013). The former three are SFF novels, published originally by Gollancz, the latter is the literary–historical novel he mapped out on a napkin, published by Canongate:

> [T]hey all tie up. Three of those endings make me cry and one of them makes me feel satisfied and I think that's interesting because they do different things. The one that makes me feel satisfied is *The Last Banquet*, whereas the other three I can actually cry – and I cried writing the endings because they bring things together that need to happen. None of them are happy endings but they are all satisfactory endings, which I think for me is important.

Grimwood's account of a 'satisfactory ending' seemed to be similar to Jackson's 'landing' in that he seeks some kind of character resolution, though in *The Last Banquet* this is a resolution that seems to have divided his readers. The novel is, on one level, the picaresque journey of a self-invented nobleman and gourmet in an immediately pre-Revolutionary France but it is underpinned with a complex intellectual structure. It ends with the protagonist/narrator, who has taken the Versailles menagerie of wild beasts into exile as Paris erupts, being eaten alive by a tiger. In the last scenes the narrator addresses readers directly, reminding them that they have been writers as well as readers throughout and, as Grimwood paraphrases: 'Now I need you to write the final bit because I can't write it anymore, because obviously I'm about to be eaten alive.' Grimwood explained the novel's design, noting that: 'It goes through a medieval worldview to a humanist one to a modernist one to at the very, very end a postmodernist one.' When he describes this as a satisfactory ending, he seems to be thinking primarily of intellectual satisfaction, whereas with his SF novels, emotional satisfaction seems to have been paramount. Grimwood's shift from emotionally engaging to intellectually engaging resolutions may partly be a question of genre but he explained that a commitment to structural variety is, for him, primarily about avoiding boredom: 'the big problem with fiction is that, it seems to me, publishers would like you to write the same book twelve times in a row!' Mick Jackson also expressed the importance for a writing career of ensuring that you break new ground with each novel:

> You're aware of trying to avoid repeating yourself and that's bound to have an influence on the decisions that you make. […] You want to do something different; that's not just to do with the subject matter and how you approach it, but also those quite fundamental choices between left and right that you make all the way through a novel. When you start a new project you always think, 'this is going to be so different to everything else' and by the time you're halfway through you think 'Oh fuck! There's the grave in the woods again!'

This desire to do something different has led to a significant shift in Jackson's endings. He noted that with his first two novels: 'I attempted to have a big kind of closure, some sort of resolution. Whereas with *The Widow's Tale* and *Yuki-Chan in Brontë Country* there is that sense that […] they've landed but they're continuing. Their life continues beyond this novel.' The novelist's skill in creating a believable world is central to this kind of resolution. Jackson explained: 'for the story you're just picking this bit of their life. […] Are these four days more interesting, or these four months, or earlier on?' Here, the novelist's skill is in identifying what, in the critical literature is termed 'the narratable' from a history that stretches back and forwards well beyond the limits of the novel.

Barney Norris outlined a similar trajectory, describing his first novel: *Five Rivers Met on a Wooded Plain* (2016) as 'short stories by someone getting away with the trick of not knowing how to write a novel yet'. He confessed that the ending was 'a bit overdone, a bit over-neat. It's a sort of "zoom back out" of an ending', in which you 'watch' the end of the book, from a distance rather than experiencing it.' In contrast, his second novel, *Turning for Home* (2018) is 'one of those second book projects of […] how do I actually do this? How do you write a book? What do I think a novel is? What is my politics of the novel?' His intention was to create 'a last event that takes us to a new emotional place. […] By the time you get to the end you feel quite rocked'. Norris describes this as 'sort of more like a book [than a play]' but he nevertheless feels that he was still following his playwright's instinct:

> With plays I feel building to emotional catharsis is the game. [T]he thing that I'm really interested in trying to do […] is something slightly more Colm Tóibín. I'm interested in this sort of dissipation ending in his work, that I think gives you a sense of the world going on after the story, whereas I think [my previous novels] feel like stories that are wrapped up and then stop'.

He suggested that one way to achieve this was to begin to write in the third person: 'It's less obvious that it's a teller telling the tale and that gives you the possibility to leave the book open in a different way.'

Wyl Menmuir was perhaps the most committed of any of the writers to a resisting the limits of a conventional narrative structure. The ending of *The Many* (2016) turns one's reading of the rest of the novel on its head. The reader becomes gradually aware that the book is about something entirely other than what they had originally thought: the ostensible setting is metaphorical, revealing the state of the protagonist's mind. Menmuir explained that the book started as a short story based on his own experience: 'It's no secret that the story at the heart of it is a very personal story to me, it's something that I have experience of and I kind of worked through that process of 'Why? Why? […] I needed to write that story. And I needed to do it justice.' The justice Menmuir talks about is emotional authenticity and his task as a novelist was to find a narrative shape that could convey it. He slotted the original story into the final third of the book almost untouched, as a reverie by the protagonist. It becomes the 'revealed story' that explains the metaphorical setting.

Instinct and Craft

Several of the novelists talked of writing as a negotiation between instinct and craft. Robertson spoke about the need for 'two different heads' in the writing process. Jackson, likewise, spoke of writing as a process that engages both the conscious and unconscious mind. He noted that in his early writing career:

> I was one of those writers who had no idea, waited for the thunder and lightning and then got it down, and sitting in this workshop hearing these other writers talking about revision, I'd think 'What the hell are they talking about?' [...] The first thing I learned at Norwich[17] was that you should, of course, go back if you can improve it, and if you can't improve it, then you're an incredible writer.[…] So in a way that was the beginning of me beginning to appreciate that difference between the creative part of the brain and the critical part of the brain.

For Jackson, allowing the unconscious to do its work is vital, but the critical part of the brain must recognise and contribute to the unconscious process. This is the insight that he tries to convey to creative writing students:

> Probably the one honest thing I say to rookie writers is, for all the theories and the ten golden rules […] – all that sort of stuff that's said about drawing certain parts of the process into [a] critical light – I always say: 'leave room for the voodoo'. […] I

[17] The Creative Writing MA at University of East Anglia

> think there will always be something that's going on either in the way you formulate an idea or in the moment when you're actually getting an idea where you go 'Wow! Where did that come from?' And you think 'Who cares? It's good! Let's try and generate more of it.'

While Jackson seemed to have found a way to reconcile his creative inspiration and critical detachment, both Carthew and Fuller expressed some reluctance to question their creative process too closely. For Carthew, this is connected with her identity as a working-class writer:

> I am uneducated. I left school at fifteen. So I don't always know exactly how something's done because if I did I would be very analytical when I'm writing. I would be like, oh that doesn't work! [...] It's pure poetry to me! It's not even just writing: it's colours, it's music, it's absolutely so much creativity that even if it's not perfect, it's almost perfect.

Jackson's phrase 'leave room for the voodoo', Norris's 'tractor beam' of knowing where you're going and Carthew's synaesthetic embrace of 'pure poetry' are colourful metaphors for the effects and importance of moments of inspiration. Robertson, on the other hand is much more analytical in her approach and sceptical about the deployment of such vocabulary:

> It's not magic and if you think about it it's not going to disappear. A lot of people […] think so much about writing that they end up with a very instinctual sense of this sentence working or this paragraph working or this chapter working, but they wouldn't be able to tell you how it works. And they fear that if they look too hard it'll fall apart.

For Robertson, learned craft is pre-eminent and what might seem to be magic is more to do with an instinct acquired through exercise of that craft. Robertson was in the minority of the authors I interviewed who did not have formal training (Jackson, Fuller, Menmuir and Norris all took MAs in Creative Writing). Her publisher had invested in her craft by sending her to the Robert McKee Story Seminar[18] but she also spoke about the influence of her previous career as a TV director: 'I still think in TV terms a lot when I write. It's about the wide shot and the close-up, and […] point of view. [I]n TV you're always looking to express somebody's internal state through their external behaviours, which is exactly what you want to do in novels.' She felt that this technical element of learning the craft of narrative was neglected both by literary publishers and by university creative writing departments.

[18] An intensive three-day course for novelists, film and television writers

Reaching the End

Both Grimwood's napkin synopsis and Norris's tractor beam suggest not just a moment of inspiration but a confluence of the unconscious and conscious mind: a critical clarity in which aesthetic and structural concerns and solutions converge. For both Robertson and Jackson, the initial momentum of a new novel can be similar. Jackson noted that 'the first third of a novel is fantastic as a writing experience because everything is possible, nothing is compromised', but the 'middle act' is the moment when critical faculties are most challenged:

> You know occasionally you walk down the street and someone's doing the phone lines. It's probably slightly different now but they used to have the front off the big green box and they'd have all these four thousand wires in their hands. That's how I would sometimes feel [...] thinking 'Right, I've got all this great fan of wires, how the fuck do I put it back together without shutting down the entire telephone network of North London?'

In this 'middle act' of writing, an attuned instinct is insufficient and the book becomes a complicated intellectual puzzle and much harder work. Similarly, Robertson notes: 'I find myself getting into the longeurs, which normally happens around 30,000 words. […] It's just the nightmare stage, because you've […] lost the initial momentum, your ending, which you have a really cool idea of [and] is going to be brilliant, is still miles away and you've got to keep on battling through the middle.'

Claire Fuller finds the whole of the first draft a struggle, characterised by tension between moments of creative inspiration and a slow and difficult 'thinking through', in which she finds she frequently sends characters down blind alleys and has to bring them back. She described ploughing on to 'the point at which, when I reach it, I can write the end. And I'm not sure I'm optimistic all that way. For a year-and-a-half I'm quite pessimistic.' The moment when she decides a draft is 'worth submitting [...] knowing that it has some big issues, but finding it quite hard after having written for a year and a half, to see them myself' seems to be transformative. After feedback from her literary agent, she is able to work for twelve-hour days for six months, during which she tries to adopt the perspective of 'the single reader […] reading it for the first time […] to help with the suspense or the questions. Lots of layering, lots of little hints and themes that are played on later.'

Wyl Menmuir described a similarly intense period of editing his first draft of *The Many*:

> I spent a lot of time moving stuff around once I'd finished. Once I'd finished writing it, I cut it up into sections and said 'Well, if I put this here, and this here, and this here' and just played with the order of things, to make sure it flowed like I wanted it to flow. The idea behind it was that you'd […] almost have to read [it] twice. I've planted all the information that you need throughout the book.

Menmuir talks of directing readers to read more slowly on their second reading, and this ideal reading process mirrors a writing pattern discussed by several of the novelists, of writing a first draft through to the ending with increasingly furious momentum, and then writing back from the ending much more slowly, ensuring that the apparatus is there, that the clues have been placed, that the characters are motivated and their actions consistent, or, as Robertson described it, integrated into the 'bloodstream' of the novel. For Carthew 'once you're at the end, it's almost that Eureka moment you've got to where […] absolutely, that's perfect! And then […] you have to pull the rest of the book up to that standard!' Carthew's experience is that the ending of a book is always stronger than the beginning, in the sense of both truer to her artistic conception and better crafted because of what she has learned as a writer in the course of writing that book. For some writers there was a sense that, if you write the other way around, carefully plotting your way through to the end, the ending may lack authenticity, or in a phrase used by Barney Norris's that the bell might fail to 'peal true'. Mick Jackson was more sceptical about the idea of authenticity emerging only from creative flow, describing the writing of *The Underground Man* as 'an absolute grind in some ways', which he illustrated with an anecdote of spending a day writing a vital scene, only to accidentally delete it and to be forced to reconstruct it from notes:

> [N]ow when I look back I can't tell what I wrote in that lovely dreamy abstract way and what I wrote in a rather cynical 'I've just got to get this guy through this room and into the next'. So my conclusion is that as far as the reader's concerned it wouldn't surprise me if they can't tell the difference between what is the thunderbolts and lightning sort of romantic writing and what is me just thinking 'OK, he's got to do this.'

Character and Setting

In contrast to narratological accounts of 'ending strategies' most of the writers did not appear to think strategically about plot resolution. Character was stressed as consistently both more important and more interesting than plot and this was just as true of Robertson and Grimwood in their genre novels as of the 'literary' novelists: the way to an 'authentic' ending in which the bell 'peals true' is to ensure that a character's journey is true to them, and there are no 'skewed motivations' (in Imogen Robertson's term). For many of the writers, setting was equally important as a driver of narrative, and often too, becomes a 'landing' point as Mick Jackson noted with *The Underground Man*. Here, geographical closure and emotional closure are intertwined:

> Usually I have a pretty strong character and for me character and situation creates narrative. Put those two things together, get them scratching against each other, and that friction creates the narrative for me. I'm sure most writers have a kind of vague idea where the characters are going to go. […] *The Underground Man* is going from eccentricity into madness, […] a pretty profound trajectory. For *Yuki-Chan*, she is trying to come to terms with loss. And for me, the character's trajectory is pretty much the narrative.

Imogen Robertson concurred:

> The two [plot and character] are indistinguishable. I mean obviously you can have the inciting incident, the thing that happens outside, you know, the bomb going off, or the body or whatever it is, but your plot only gets going when your character reacts to that, and how they react is driven by their character.

Robertson regards the motivation of the characters as the pre-eminent factor driving the plot and making sense of the ending in both literary fiction and crime fiction, commenting that when she was dissatisfied with a literary novel it was usually because motivations were underdeveloped. Natasha Carthew told me that character always came first when planning the trajectory of the novel:

> I have to walk the characters in every single book. I have to see what they're doing. And I have to see them having conversations in order to know that they are who I want them to be. They might not be likeable but you've got to like them enough as a writer that it's going to be interesting to write.

Setting is equally important for Carthew. Her narratives often take the form of journeys, taking protagonists to a new geographical place as well as an emotional place. In *All Rivers*

Run Free (2018), her central character, Ia Pendilly, escapes an abusive partner on the north Cornish coast, travelling along the Tamar river back to her childhood home on the south coast – her literal and metaphorical 'journey's end' as well as the ending of the book. Carthew makes this distance of sixty-five miles into an epic journey, mirroring the emotional distance her protagonist has come, through her detailed attentiveness to the changes in landscape. She terms her setting a justopia: a Cornwall still recognisable but suffering from disintegration, extreme poverty and lawlessness, the result of political developments which are not discussed in the book. There is a sense that this could be the very near future: 'When certain drugs can't come into the country, or when we can't get bread because some trucks are [stuck] on the M5. […] And within twenty-four hours people go mad.' With Ia's return to the south coast of her childhood, there is a sense that a natural order has been restored. The closing of the circle brings a sense of hope in very bleak times. The ending is also, partly, a redemption though nature, and Carthew feels that her writing practice is integral to the settings of her novels: 'I love mixing the setting up so you're not just in one place. In all my books pretty much everyone's outside the whole time, because I write outside the whole time. I mean I could write about being indoors in rooms and things but [laughs] I would have to make that an adventure in itself.'

Carthew talks about 'walking' her characters and for Claire Fuller too, her vision of the shape of a new novel begins with putting a character into a setting – *Swimming Lessons* was inspired by a house in Dorset where Fuller had spent a holiday – and walking them around:

> Because I've now written three books I can see how I work. […] I get a quite strong idea of the person and the location – the location is very important to me – and I put them in that place and I kind of see what they do. […] Sometimes I realise I've got to a dead end and I have to backtrack because I feel this is going in a direction I don't want or the characters just seem stuck.

Mick Jackson began research for *The Underground Man* with several visits to the Welbeck Estate in Nottinghamshire, where the story is set: 'It was obviously my own fictionalised version of the Fifth Duke of Portland, but the fact that his estate was there and I could walk around this estate – that gave me great reassurance.' Jackson used this as an exercise in triggering creative thought, much as Claire Fuller uses flash fictions to develop characters. He explained: 'research is many things but it's not least a way of preoccupying my conscious mind therefore allowing my unconscious mind to turn over all this stuff. [I] think,

"Oh, that could be a scene in a wood, there's a path going up a hill – what happens if there's something up there?"'

Barney Norris's first novel is set in Salisbury, but the city is more than a backdrop to the action: it is constantly present – almost a character in its own right – and equally the novel's structure is inseparable from its setting. It opens and closes with a panoramic view of the city, zooming in to focus on specific lives and zooming out again at the end. His agent, Laura Williams,[19] mentioned that 'of the handful of prizes that he was shortlisted for, the one that was the most pleasing to me was that he was on the shortlist for the Ondaatje Prize which is […] specifically for sense of place, which is exactly what that book is about.' Here form as well as content are dictated by the rich sense of place.

Wyl Menmuir's *The Many* opens in what appears to be the realistic setting of a claustrophobic Cornish fishing village, peopled by hostile and secretive fishermen. Menmuir intensively researched both, travelling around the Cornish coast, talking to fishermen and taking notes on the technical elements of their work. He noted that in character terms the fishermen in the novel were actually based on miners from country Durham: 'There was no employment, […] there was a big swagger about them and they were physically big people, but you just scratch the surface and they're little boys.' Towards the end of the novel that it becomes clear that both setting and characters – even one of the narrators – are metaphorical. But the sense of place, its haunting strangeness, its menace and the taciturn obduracy of the inhabitants are integral to the novel's unsettling effects and to its narrative trajectory. For Menmuir, obtaining a realist effect through careful research was essential to the effectiveness of the book's ending and part of his responsibility to readers: keeping them invested as the constructed world begins to crack

Musicality, Rhythm, Pace

For Natasha Carthew the creative process is 'pure poetry', 'colours' and 'music'. Carthew was a poet before she was a novelist and it is not surprising that she is interested in the musicality of the language. However, when I asked her about structure, she also made a musical analogy, discussing her novel in progress and noting that she had just 'found the

[19] Interviewed for Chapter Five

rhythm, that's what I do: I find the rhythm'. She said it was impossible for her to start writing a novel until she had found it. This sense of a novel as music, with its own rhythm, tone and final note appeared in three of the interviews with novelists and several of the literary industry interviews. For Jon Courtenay Grimwood 'I think the idea of seeing [the novel] as music is quite helpful, of knowing what the tone is.' Both he and Jackson referred to the 'beats' of the plot – a term that comes originally from screenwriting,[20] but also has musical connotations. The mood and tone of the ending were, for Grimwood, of particular interest:

> It has to be the right sentence. […] It's the dying fall, it is completely musical, that last [beat], it's what they take away with them. So, whether it's a colour, or a mood or a note, it's the last thing that remains.

For Wyl Menmuir, pace seemed to be more important than tone or rhythm. He talked about the way in which the novelist directs the reading experience, especially at the end of the novel, explaining that with *The Many* he had aimed to write in a way that: 'force[s] you to read it slowly' so that the reader would 'get to the end of the paragraph and think "What was that you just said?" and go back and slow down the reading experience.' Menmuir's commitment to the idea of 'slow-reading' reflects a quality of distinction of the 'literary' novel, that both novelists and critics have drawn attention to. For example, Howard Jacobson makes a distinction between the page-turning novels he perceives contemporary publishers prefer and the slow-reading quality of Henry James or D.H. Lawrence: 'You think, "My God, I've been on this page for two hours – great! terrific!" […] There is something about that lowering yourself down into that substrata which is language. […] It's at that moment when the reader becomes the writer, because that's what writing is like.' (Jacobson 2018). It seemed that Menmuir, too, sees the pace of reading as intimately tied to an exchange of empathy between reader and writer, which comes into focus at the novel's end, and is at the heart of his endeavour in 'doing justice' to his story.

It should be noted that not all the authors thought of their work in musical terms: Mick Jackson and Imogen Robertson deployed architectural rather than musical imagery. Jackson talked of significant scenes as 'stones in the arch' of narrative, while for Robertson,

[20] It is discussed, for example in McKee (2010).

musical metaphors suggest the privileging of artistic vision over the solid craft she considered essential to a well-structured narrative. She argued:

> If you have quite a musical ear as a writer that can take you a very, very long way, but you do need to be able to take that step back and look at how you're constructing your entire story. It's the blueprint of the entire building really, otherwise you're going to end up with an awful lot of nice wallpaper and a building that leaks.

Negotiating Endings

Claire Fuller described the beginnings of the editing process:

> I've gone in [to her agency] for a big discussion about what works and doesn't work. With *Swimming Lessons* I knew that the whole of the second half was wrong. At the end of the first draft there was no big fire, the momentum was kind of lost, there was a wake where they spill his ashes. It was completely different really. And I knew that it wasn't right but I just needed someone to say 'this isn't right'.

Fuller conceives her endings in scenic terms and to date these actual scenes have remain intact through the final edits:

> *Our Endless Numbered Days* ends with Peggy in the bath and that was in the first draft. I might have played around with the words or how pregnant she was or what she was thinking, but she was always in the bath from the very first time I got to the end. And the same with *Swimming Lessons*. I think in the first draft Flora is with Richard on the beach and she buries the little solider in the sand and then the epilogue starts. That didn't change. […] Nobody wanted any changes.

In discussing her reading preferences, Fuller, like Menmuir, revealed a strong preference for open endings that require the reader to do imaginative work. This preference is reflected in the ending of *Swimming Lessons*, with the disappearance of a central character, Ingrid, still unresolved. It was this aspect that led to the most intense discussions with both her agent and publisher and Fuller noted that she was firmly dissuaded from complete open-endedness:

> Both of them said 'I'm not sure that readers would be happy with that' They'd want just something, some indication that possibly she's alive, or possibly she's dead. I hadn't planned to put the epilogue in until they said that. […] They seemed happy with that – both of them – that for readers who wanted hope it could give them some hope.

The epilogue Fuller agreed to add contains a possible sighting of Ingrid but it also makes an explicit visual link to the beginning of the book and is thus is a closing of the circle, which gives shape to the novel. While Fuller was satisfied with the compromise here, she included a metatextual hint to the reader of the way she hopes they will engage with the novel, with one of the central characters, Gil, teaching his students about reader-response theory.

Barney Norris experienced similar pressure from his publisher to 'give some hope' to the reader. He recalled receiving a response to his first draft of *Turning for Home*: 'I had this pressure [from the publisher] of 'could you lighten the ending a little? Could you give us hope?' And you go: I think […] qualified hope – not very much though!' What we find here is agents and publishers acting as representatives of the reader, attempting to steer authors away from too much ambiguity that might be frustrating to readers (Fuller) or result in too bleak an ending (Norris). These are relatively subtle 'nudges' from agents and publishers but I wondered whether authors had experience of more significant narrative interventions. Some literary industry interviewees (see Chapter 5) suggested that the commercial success of psychological thrillers has led to an increase in 'twist endings'. Since both Norris and Fuller have written novels with unexpected twists in the final pages I asked how, and when these had emerged. Fuller was adamant that 'I didn't set out to write a book with a twist. [The] twists just happened because I wrote myself into corners that I didn't know any way of getting out of'. She was clear however that the twists in the plot happened in her first draft, before the book had been seen by her agent. In Norris's *Turning for Home* the reader understands that the central character, Kate's anorexia has been triggered by her grief at the death of her boyfriend and this is what has propelled the action. This turns out to be a misapprehension: 'That's the game isn't it?' Norris told me: 'Everyone will assume terrible car accident, Kate becomes ill, grief . . .' In the final pages of the book we discover that Joe did not die in the accident and the ending becomes more emotionally complex and more intense. But 'the game' for Norris is his own game – a narrative technique that he learned from his experience in theatre. Norris explained that his agent, Laura Williams, had been 'super-involved' in the development of his first novel, *Five Rivers Met on a Wooded Plain*, and that he had learned a great deal from working with her. However, in retrospect:

> With the first book I can see a place where I feel this work is compromised by concessions I've made to someone else's voice. But with the second book it's more […] right, how do I actually do this? […] I'm really proud of *Turning for Home*.

Norris's theatrical work has tended to necessitate collaboration in storytelling and sometimes this has been very productive: he recalled, for example the director of a recent play suggesting a change to the ending that had been 'totally revolutionary […] the play feels much more intelligent and nuanced than it did.' However, there had also been a bad experience with the ending of another play which led Norris to a shift in his understanding of the author's moral rights:

> I discovered my rights retrospectively and I'm going to be a lot more circumspect about what I listen to and what I don't, because it turns out I'm allowed to be, which is really exciting! [...] No one can change anything if I don't say yes!

This shift in understanding places the right of integrity at the heart of Norris's conception of the artist's responsibility to the reader. He sees the ending as a point at which both integrity and responsibility became apparent:

> If you don't have something that you're aiming for, I do think you're in trouble. […] You can make compromise after compromise to fit everybody's views into your work. At the end of the day the only person everyone responds to when they read the book is you […] and if its someone else's slightly fudgy ending, then it's you that has to take the rap.

Wyl Menmuir described a somewhat different experience of being edited. His debut was signed by the literary independent Salt Publishing while he was completing his Creative Writing MA at Manchester Metropolitan University. His tutor, Nicholas Royle, became his editor:

> Because he knew the book so well he basically said 'I trust that you know what you're doing with this'. And he gave me edits but they were quite light touch. […] He said 'I want this to be your authentic first novel. I don't want to have influenced it in some other way.

Menmuir saw this editorial freedom as one of the benefits of signing with a small independent press, noting 'I didn't make any compromises. I know that in the future I will have to make compromises.'

Of her own field, Robertson noted that 'historical fiction is strange, because it's much more a setting than a genre. There's crime, adventure, romance, military and […] literary too, all of which have their own associated tropes and expectations'. These include expectations of about endings. She argued that for literary fiction 'actively resisting the tropes and expectations of other genres' has become, in itself 'a trope and expectation', perceiving a tendency towards what she called 'the embrace of the ambiguous'. This might suggest elements that allow readers to make their own judgement – an open-ended narration, or uncertainty as to the reliability of a narrator for example. For Robertson, though it seemed primarily to be a critique connected to a failure of craft. She expressed particular frustration with novels in which the character's motivation was weak or unbelievable: 'The times I've felt disappointed with literary fiction it is often a skewed motivation. A passive protagonist tends to be an ill-motivated one.' She argued that you cannot have either an upbeat or a tragic ending 'if your protagonist doesn't have any particular needs or wants and doesn't really suffer any consequences as a result of what they discover.' Some might see this as a rejection of conventional narrative tropes, but for Robertson it is more commonly about the privileging of aesthetic concerns over the craft of storytelling:' I think a lot of literary novelists fear that if they get too clear about those sorts of things that it gets too procedural and the book becomes false, they will lose the aesthetic and artistic urge. '

Jon Courtenay Grimwood's traversing of genre has offered an opportunity to understand the practicalities of genre difference in terms of editing:

> Canongate's requirements are totally different to Penguin's requirements, totally different to Gollancz's or Simon Schuster's requirements. I hadn't thought of it until I started having different editors, but editors have very firm opinions on what constitutes a structure, what constitutes a suitable ending. And that's before you get into a difference between American endings and UK endings.

He described SF in similar terms to Robertson's view of historical fiction, as more a setting than a genre:

> SF can be anything. It can be crime, it can be thriller, it can be romance. It can be anything you want it to be. Readers are used to extrapolating and understanding what's not being said. They read widely, inside and outside genre, which for me makes them more forgiving of complication and broken narrative.

This, for Grimwood, allows the kind of creative freedom that he has not found in other areas of his literary career: 'There is, I think, a lot less editing. A house like Gollancz does much, much less editing than say, people who publish thrillers or people who publish literary.' Having been able to take advantage of the freedom in science fiction to write increasingly 'literary' novels – Grimwood found writing thrillers for Penguin a much more rigidly circumscribed authorial experience, especially with respect to endings. Penguin agreed to buy his first thriller only on the condition that he changed the ending: 'I really liked the first ending but it was a little too elliptical and a little too mystical for them and they wanted it changed back into something more solid.' Later in the editorial process he recalled that his editor complained about his tendency to 'seed' crucial plot points through the book, so that the reader cannot make immediate sense of them but needs to 'join the dots' as they work through the narrative.

> I was like 'I'm hugely proud of doing that!' Essentially it's [...] no, you have to give them stuff upfront [...] you can't, with this kind of book, expect people to put something there, something there, and something there together. Because they're going to be reading it too fast. They miss one point and nothing fits.

Penguin's editorial interventions here are geared towards the publisher's perception of the reader as consumer. It is the responsibility of both the author and the publisher to provide the consumer with a 'page-turning' novel that will make them return to the 'brand' (i.e. both the author-as-brand and publisher-as-brand). It was also clear from Grimwood's account that Penguin were aiming for a sale of film and television rights. Having completed the first draft of the novel, he was told to structure it to fit a speculative film script and sent a manual on how to go about it:

> It was an astonishing book. It's huge. It's literally: here is a film, this is what happens before the credits, this is your first scene. […] Essentially it's how to structure a script so that it won't be sent back, on the basis that you will have every single point the script needs to hit from beginning to end.

Grimwood contrasted this very prescriptive guidance he received all through his relationship with Penguin, to his experience of working on his literary novel, *The Last Banquet*, with Canongate:

> The copy editor telephoned me and said 'I'd like to put a couple of chapters in the first person rather than the third person'. I'd used point of view and tense in *The Last Banquet* to talk about immediacy. It switches between close third and far

> third; and present tense, past tense and more complicated tenses. She said, 'I think I'd like to change a couple of chapters. I'll change them, you look at them. If you like them, we'll leave them, if you don't like them I'll change them back.' And I thought, that's astonishing; somebody's about to spend eight days changing tenses!

The intervention was effective and Grimwood agreed to keep the edited versions of two of the three chapters. He said 'It was an extraordinary edit, it was probably the best edit I have ever had because it was somebody who absolutely understood what the book was doing, and what I was trying to get the book to do. And every change improved it.'

Natasha Carthew's first book was, unexpectedly to her and her agent, acquired by Bloomsbury as a young adult novel. She expressed relief that in moving to the literary imprint, Riverrun with her third novel: *All Rivers Run Free*, she had been able 'to break away from that YA genre. [...] I'm really pleased with myself that I did.' She explained that while her first novel, *Winter Damage* (2013), had not been significantly edited by Bloomsbury in other respects: 'It was full of swearing! They had to take the swearing out.' There was a sense that certain conventions had to be followed when writing for a specific genre audience; while with her literary novel: *All Rivers Run Free*, she had much more authorial freedom, making the decision for example to write with very minimal punctuation (it has full stops only) to reveal the distinctive voice of her lead character. In Carthew's account it is writing for an audience 'used to literary reading' that gives her the most freedom, while in Grimwood's account we see not only a distinction in editorial practice between genre and literary fiction, but a distinction between two fields of genre fiction, with science fiction allowing him the greatest authorial freedom and thriller writing the most specific professional requirements. Penguin's rigid genre expectations seem to have impelled him to push against the limits. He said of the original ending of *Moskva* (2016), rejected by Penguin: 'I was only seeing if I could get away with it', and he is clearly delighted that, despite Penguin's rigorous editing: 'there is a supernatural element in Moskva almost nobody has picked up on. That's the folding something inside something else and getting away with it.'

Fuller and Menmuir's experiences of negotiating endings with editors are supported by evidence from the editors I interviewed for Chapter Five. There is an expectation that publishers of literary fiction will stay behind the scenes, offering gentle nudges rather than the kind of significant structural interventions we see in Grimwood's account. For

Robertson, these distinctions in editing practice point go back to the notion of the literary writer as what she calls the 'artist-genius' and the genre writer as a craftsperson, who may be sent on courses by their publisher or provided with detailed manuals on how to craft a film script but are also expected to toe the line and write what the publisher knows they can sell. Robertson's observations and Grimwood's experiences of different editing practices point to a conception of genre fiction as a professional field, while literary fiction is the realm of the inspired amateur, a distinction which, as Robertson points out is 'very useful to the publishing industry because it means they don't pay […] very much – we get paid in cool points instead.'

Responsibility to the Reader

Mick Jackson expressed a desire to write an ending he described as 'landed but continuing'. A desire to ensure that the ending is open enough to give the created world credibility and to engage the reader's imagination was shared by many of the writers. Fuller noted that it was an aspect of the structure that her publisher encouraged her to think about: 'My editors, especially my American editor, like novels that make you think after the point of the book's ending'. Menmuir argued that 'endings are […] difficult because they are inherently false structures, in that things don't end, they continue, and yet we have to bring it to a conclusion. […] You want your reader to continue living the book after the experience of reading.' When he finished the first draft of *The Many* he tested out its effects by sending it to two (professional) readers:

> They both got back to me with the same frustrations about it […] that's kind of how I knew I was on the right track. Because they were concerned with the lack of resolution and with having to hold something quite contradictory in their heads about the two narratives at the same time. And I thought, 'Yes that's what I meant. I know that that frustrates you but I think I can find a reader who will relish that, who will want that sort of relationship.'

Menmuir felt he had to ignore the (professional) readers, in order to be responsible to his imagined, ideal reader. He liked the idea of a reader who would approach the destabilising ending of *The Many* as an intellectual puzzle and having reached the end would be compelled to go back and reread, uncovering his carefully placed clues that the surface of the novel was not all it seemed to be. Ultimately though, he sees the novel not so much as an intellectual experience as an affective experience, suggesting that 'I'm less interested in it all making sense than I am in […] getting some sort of emotional response in the

reader.[…] I'm not that bothered if readers understand. I think it doesn't matter if they understand as long as they care.' His ambitions with the ending and his careful peppering of the novel with clues, which the reader may not be looking for, is reminiscent of Sarah Waters' account of writing *The Little Stranger*:

> I still receive a steady stream of emails asking me to 'explain' the novel's ending. [...] My usual response is to say that I deliberately left the resolution open, but the fact is, I worked hard to spike the novel with clues. When these clues do snag their reader, I experience a glow of writerly satisfaction and feel I pitched things just right. When they don't – well, *The Little Stranger* is about conflict and waste; I never wanted its effect to be tidy.
> (Waters 2011).

Several of the authors talked explicitly about the ending as a site where the author's relationship with the reader comes to the fore. Natasha Carthew expressed it thus:

> On endings, I always think that you have a kind of a contract with a reader. If they're reading your book and they get to the end, you owe it to them to provide them with an ending they will be happy with. Not that it's a happy ending, but they will say, 'Yes, you haven't lied to me this whole way.'

For Carthew, this meant that there was a requirement to give some element of hope at the end a bleak narrative that was consistent with the character's journey and offered some reward for her struggle. She talked about how she navigated this sense of responsibility in in *All Rivers Run Free*:

> It was important for me that it was a story about hope at the end of the day, because I'm working class and I talk a lot about working class characters and themes and it doesn't always have to be miserable. Some things are miserable, but you've got to take the hope from that. And if she didn't have a tough background, she wouldn't be the character she was [...] I love that in her, that she's just like: 'I'm going to find a way even when there's nothing left.' At the end of the day she did find her freedom, and I gave her a couple of things as well, like a person and a baby possibly. Even If it's not much, it's just got to be something, that's really important.

For Menmuir, too, the open ending of *The Many* allowed for an optimism that wasn't forced, but rang true:

> What I wanted to get with Ethan, was a character who's not able to confront, to process that grief. And not to say at the end that everything's going to be OK., but to give a sense of the possibility of hope. Because I do realize that it's dark. But I

> want it to be, not redemptive but with an element of hope that comes out of the end of it, where you think, ah, you're not through this but you're getting there.

Robertson noted the difficulties for literary novelists in delivering 'a sense of closure and completion even if the endings are ambiguous and open. I don't want to feel that a narrative just ran out of steam.' She argued that it was much more straightforward for genre fiction to deliver a sense of satisfaction to readers:

> [C]rime is such a conservative genre in many ways, because you have the murderer's disruption of the status quo and, particularly in this country, you are promising that you're going to redeliver the status quo at the far end. […] Novels that are on the more literary end, in as far as they don't have a kind of 'The bomb's defused! The killer's found!' sort of ending, then there needs to be, I think, some sort of […] a spiritual satisfaction: […] a feeling of a conclusion that makes sense of the story, some element of catharsis. And you need to be placed somewhere, you want to look up from a book and see the world slightly differently.

Robertson's suggestion that the reader needs to 'be placed somewhere' is subtly different to Mick Jackson's idea of 'landing' in that it emphasises the intentionality of the author, not only in crafting endings, but in managing the reader's response to them.

Jon Courtenay Grimwood's aim is for a reader to be in dialogue with the book as they read it. He describes the reading experience as, in this sense, mirroring the writing experience: 'Mostly writing seems to me to be a journey of discovery of what's going on; you discover it and then the reader discovers it.' Sometimes this discovery is an intellectual one but Grimwood also had experience of readers expressing a visceral response to his work:

> People take endings very, very seriously. I was once chased down the street by a fan who objected to the ending of *Stamping Butterflies*! […] It wasn't the ending he wanted, which is fair enough. You're allowed to want to end in a particular way.

Grimwood explained that there was a significant difference in expectations about what constitutes a satisfying ending between UK and US audiences and he saw this as especially marked in genre novels: 'The cliché is that at the end of an American novel the hero has got the girl, saved the empire and probably rules something; at the end of a British equivalent the dog doesn't die.' With literary fiction he suggested that American endings tend to be tidier than UK endings, although he noted that both he and his publisher had received complaints about the ending of his literary-historical novel *The Last Banquet*, which is in

certain respects an unusually 'tidy ending', in that it pursues a central theme of the book – appetite – to its most extreme conclusion. He said:

> I think it might have been a tiny bit postmodern for some of the readers because essentially a lot of them are relative purists of historical novels .[. . .] There was a certain level of 'This wasn't what we were expecting!' which interests me because I would have said it [the narrative] led up to that.

Wyl Menmuir made a distinction between the passive and active reader making clear that he sees himself as writing for the latter:

> The reading experience I really enjoy is a book that really makes me think 'What am I reading here? What are you really saying? What's the subtext?' I try to push that as far as I can. 'How far is the reader willing to go in creating their own meaning for this?' Because what I think splits people is […] there are those people who go, 'Oh God, yes, that's what I like about reading!' And those people who say 'Well, no I'm not prepared to put enough of myself into that.'

For Menmuir, then, it is part of the author's responsibility to give their reader the chance to create their own meaning, so that the book becomes part of their mental landscape. Both Fuller and Carthew had experience of readers who had engaged closely with the narrative and did not want it to end. Both felt that this was an effect of the relatively open endings of their novels:

> [W]ith all my books people ask me: 'Oh, are you going to write a sequel?' To every single book! And I always take that as, well firstly, because they've enjoyed the book or they like the characters, and also because you have left it a little bit open. […] You can't finish a book and just say 'that's it!'
> (Natasha Carthew)

> I've been to a few book groups, mostly who have read *Our Endless Numbered Days*. They are all generally happy with the ending, though lots of them say 'What happens next?'. Like I have the answers! […] The question I get most […] is are you writing a sequel? – because they want that last chapter.
> (Claire Fuller)

Fuller was adamant that she believed her responsibility for the story and for the characters ends with the ending of each novel. Barney Norris, on the other hand, had a clear sense of the characters going on beyond the limits of the book. His work features repeat characters: both between novels and between plays and novels. He describes a character in his second novel who also features in his first as having 'unfinished business, so I came back to her […] it's a funny thing to let them go'. Grimwood was the only author to talk explicitly of the

challenges of serial writing, noting that crafting a character to take the writer through multiple narratives was highly demanding: 'You can usually see when people are getting to hate their characters'. He explained that his Penguin editor had offered him the chance to write a stand-alone novel, to give him 'a break from the characters, so that I could come back to liking [them].' This is a qualification to his earlier point about publishers wanting authors to write the same book twelve times over. It may be a manifestation of Penguin's 'professionalisation' of the genre author, but it is also a way of ensuring that the author meets their responsibility to the reader to produce a work in which the bell 'peals true'.

Conclusion

While it is not possible to generalise about the field of authorial creation on the basis of seven interviews, there are common themes here that may be carried through to the chapters that follow, to inform our understanding and interrogate the responses of literary agents, publishers, prize judges and readers. There are also distinctive vocabularies of description and evaluation that sometimes overlap but are rarely identical with literary-critical terms.

Endings seem to be a point at which debates about the nature of creative practice crystallize. Thinking about the ending enables consideration of the relationship between art and craft in fiction- writing. All the authors talked about flashes of inspiration, whether a single visual image or a vision of the whole narrative trajectory; but they also acknowledged the need to put in the hours to slog towards this envisaged ending, described by Carthew as a 'nugget […] you have to dig for'. The ending is a site at which the multiple intentions of a novel are realised: it may be a site of intellectual resolution, where everything suddenly becomes clear, though we may be required to think to make it so; but it may equally (and sometimes simultaneously) be a site of affective resolution, where we are asked to feel (and possibly to cry). It is notable that authors barely talked about endings in mechanistic terms: there is a sense of fictional narratives both in literary and genre fiction being driven primarily by character but also by setting, the latter in particular rarely mentioned in the narratological literature. Endings mark the end of a journey through a particular space, though there may also be a sense that future journeys within that space are possible. The authors also explored the poetics of endings, in particular their visual and musical character. These are all internal, text-based considerations, but there was equally a

sense that endings point outwards: they are the start of the novel becoming public. In writing an ending, the author is aware that their work is ready to face the judgement of the agent or editor and from there to begin its journey towards a wider readership; thus considerations of responsibility to the reader become important. The ending is also a marker of genre, though not necessarily in ways one might expect from the critical literature, since we found considerable distinction in editing practice between SF and thrillers, for example, as well as an argument that in pursuing art authors of literary novels may underprivilege craft.

In addition to these central debates we find a creative lexicon deployed here, distinct from the critical terms discussed in Chapter One. Some of the vocabulary used (the idea of the story-arc, the 'beats' of the plot) come from the burgeoning literature on creative-writing, and this does draw on narrative theory though it also draws on the creative practice of screen-writing. However, there are creative terms here that are less familiar and potentially very helpful. They include the idea of 'landing', 'the final note' and 'a last event that takes us to a new emotional place'; and expressions for creative inspiration such as the 'tractor beam' and making room for the 'voodoo'. They cover some of the practical processes of novel writing such as Jackson's metaphor of the novel as a 'fan of wires' and Robertson's notion of integrating motivations 'into the bloodstream' of the novel. There is the idea of authenticity, of a bell that 'peals true', and conversely the idea that you might be 'compromised by someone else's voice'. We also heard of the 'full-blooded roar of an event' and the ending that is 'landed but continuing'.

One of the reasons that the terms used by novelists are distinct from those used by literary critics is that they denote affective as well as critical processes. We found, in Chapter Two, that one of the innovations of reader-response theory was in mapping readers' emerging affective engagements with the text. What is helpful here is that these are responses from creators rather than readers and they may enable us to enlarge our vocabulary of ending structures to understand better the complex relationship between author, text and reader at the end of the novel.

Chapter Five – Endings and the Fiction Industry: Modes of Professional Reading

Introduction

This chapter moves beyond the authorial field of literary creation to consider the work of the agents and publishers who bring literary work to the market, and that of the prize judges who evaluate such work. It aims to reconstruct the wider processes of reasoning and valuing in which agents, editors and judges engage the contemporary novel, including their understanding of the field of literary fiction and the ways in which they demarcate the 'literary' from other forms of fiction-writing. In particular, it focuses on what role endings have in their appraisal of a work and its commercial and critical potential, whether endings are a particular site of critical intervention – and if so, how agents and publishers work with authors to revise them. Central to this reconstruction is an exploration of the different modes of reading that agents and editors bring to bear on novel manuscripts and, in the case of prize judges, on the published novel.

The chapter opens with an initial set of responses to the question of the importance of endings in order to draw out some key themes that emerged in the interviews, before situating the role of agents and publishers in the literary industry by examining how they select novels, assess their place within the market and work with the author on shaping them for publication. These opening sections provide the context in which I reconstruct the key elements that inform evaluative perspectives on endings within the literary industry, including the idea of 'landing', the musicality of endings, the search for a 'thread that draws you through', the relevance of length and the role of affect. To understand how, and why, these elements become particularly salient to the judgment of agents and editors, I turn to consider their role as informed professional readers whose practice is driven both by structural considerations concerning the market for the contemporary novel and by the values, tastes and enthusiasms that compose their aesthetic responses as individual readers. To see how these elements inform the collaborative production of the contemporary novel, I discuss the mechanics of editing endings, drawing on particular examples to address how endings are negotiated with the author, how editors and agents consider the market and the eventual reader as they edit and what adjustments may be made. Central to this discussion is an elucidation of the different modes of reading that literary industry professionals engage in. The position of the editor and agent that emerges

is a complex one that intersects with the fields of creation, production and reception of the contemporary novel and demands the ability to switch between these different modes of reading in their practical engagement with the text.

While the roles of agents and editors are central to shaping what novels enter the literary marketplace and the form in which they do so, a third figure – the prize judge – has the role of evaluating novels within that space. This chapter's reconstruction of the forms of reasoning and evaluation at play in the fiction industry ends with an analysis of prize judges as literary readers and the significance of endings for their judgments. I conclude by reflecting on the relationship of the different kinds of reading that have emerged from this investigation to the question of the importance of endings in the contemporary novel.

The Importance of Endings

Are fictional endings important and, if so, why are they important? I open with extracts giving some of my interviewees' initial responses to this question and using these responses to begin to draw out some key themes that emerged in the interviews.

Helen Garnons-Williams[21] told me:

> Endings are hugely important. I think they're very, very hard – harder than anything else […] and I think so many of them are unsatisfying. So many books I feel let down by at the end and it makes me almost viscerally angry because I've invested so much and I've loved a book and then when it doesn't work at the end […] I feel betrayed, almost. And the flip side is true. If you get to a book that ends brilliantly, it's like getting to the end of a symphony or something, where you think 'Oh my God, that was amazing!' and you then want to put it into people's hands. It immediately sets off that word of mouth and I think that's a really interesting effect.

Garnons-Williams posits a direct relationship between the well-crafted ending, the reader's affective response to the novel and its potential to be a word-of-mouth success. Though she begins by offering a professional opinion (endings are important; authors find endings particularly difficult to write; many books are published with endings that do not satisfy), she moves on very quickly to extrapolate from her own experience as a reader. There is little separation here between readerly experience and professional opinion; the former is

[21] Publishing Director, Fourth Estate

clearly informing the latter. She mentions her visceral response to literary texts; it seems that endings, whether satisfying or unsatisfying, are a privileged site of affective engagement in the novel. In common with some of the novelists interviewed, she talks of the musicality of a well-conceived ending. She went on to suggest that there is often a close relationship between 'word of mouth' success and a 'satisfying' ending, although there were significant exceptions, citing Jessie Burton's *The Miniaturist* (2014) as a novel with 'a terrible ending', which had disappointed many of 7000 reviewers quoted on Amazon 'but then they pretty much all say "I didn't care by then"'. She noted that 'as an editor, I find it terrifying'. I understood her fear to be twofold: that her professional instincts about what readers want may be awry and that consequently her advice to the author and her editorial labour may turn out to be unnecessary or even counterproductive. She added:

> In the question of whether a book becomes great, I think an ending is really important and for lots of books that have been incredibly successful the ending is very important and yet there are exceptions to the rule where, weirdly, people didn't care. I tie that into the business of publishing, so that when I read a novel and if I want to acquire it, quite often it has to happen quite fast. So I'll read it very quickly and then I'll give it to my colleagues, and ninety percent of them won't have finished by the time we're trying to buy it. They'll be making their backup decision. I mean, they trust me, that's my job – but they'll read half of it in that first instance, maybe three chapters. So books are quite often bought where only the editor will have read the ending.

Here, she raises a question addressed by several interviewees of the relative importance of beginnings and endings and the way in which the selection process in literary publishing is always informed by the former; much more rarely by the latter. Regarding *The Miniaturist* the suggestion is that the ending may have been deprivileged as a site of intervention between publisher and author since it was not one of the features that led to the book being acquired. We will see later in this chapter that the advantages of this dynamic were stressed by some respondents, who suggested that one of the joys of working on literary fiction is that there are no particular expectations with regard to endings and that this gives the author, and their agent and editor considerable freedom.

The second extract is from Lucy Luck:[22]

[22] Literary agent, Conville & Walsh (C&W)

> Personally for me I will remember a book and recommend it if the ending works. For me as a reader it's important. I think it's important for most people. I think you'll see that if there is too much hesitation about the ending, especially in literary books then it won't be recommended. It won't get word of mouth. People are more forgiving it seems of slow beginnings than they are of compromised endings. Nothing's ever perfect and a good beginning can make up for a lot, but you do see – I am thinking more of commercial fiction here – you do see responses to books that have a lot of money spent marketing them and they say, the ending was ridiculous or it was completely incredible and you notice – maybe it's not so much that book – it's the next book that people don't buy.

Like Garnons-Williams, Luck notes the close relationship between endings and the word-of-mouth recommendations that are so crucial in building momentum. She also raises the question of beginnings and endings, suggesting that endings have more impact on readers. She draws attention to 'ridiculous' and 'incredible' endings in heavily-marketed commercial fiction that may be seen to break the compact between author and reader. Her comment here suggests a division between literary and commercial fiction with regard to the creative freedom of the author, the autonomy of the editor and the effects of endings on the reader.[23] Luck's comment was echoed by Sam Baker[24] who talked of 'the big trend in psychological thrillers at the moment for what I would call the absolutely ludicrous twist [...] there have been several where the ending has been so preposterous I literally want to punch the wall', and by Laura Williams[25] who recalled the social media marketing for Sarah Pinborough's book, *Behind Her Eyes* (2017) which centred around the hashtag #WTFthatending. Williams noted that this was brilliant, but risky: 'With something like that the ending is going to be completely vital to the average reader because that's what they've been promised.'

It is important to be clear that not all the literary professionals I spoke to concurred that endings were, for them, a particular site of editorial intervention. An early response to an interview request came from Karolina Sutton at Curtis Brown:

> I would love to help, but I genuinely have nothing of interest to contribute. I don't ever isolate endings. Each manuscript is different and in my own experience there is absolutely no pattern. I think there may be more of a pattern in commercial fiction. For the vast majority of works I represent the ending is whatever the author wants it to be. I tend to do a lot more work on beginnings and on sagging middles.

[23] Luck specialises in literary fiction and it is clear from the interview that she works closely on both beginnings and endings with her literary authors.
[24] Novelist and journalist, interviewed here in her capacity as a prize judge for the Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction, The Costa Book Awards, The Desmond Elliott Prize and the British Book Awards ('the Nibbies').
[25] Literary agent, now with Greene & Heaton, but at Peters Fraser & Dunlop (PFD) at the time of our interview.

Her response was more helpful than Sutton believed it to be. Her concise email made clear her own identity as an agent: the work she represents cannot be pigeonholed, it does not have a formulaic construction, she respects her authors' distinctive vision, and she considers each book as a 'complete work' with its own structural unity of which the ending is a vital part. She is careful to distinguish the work she represents from 'commercial fiction' and also to indicate that commercial fiction is not her primary field and that she is less familiar with how it operates. She highlights her assiduous editorial work by noting that she does work a lot on beginnings and middles. Her mention of 'sagging middles' reveals a commitment to clarity and precision of expression but also may be another indicator of a form of fiction that is not plot dependent. In noting that she is prepared to work on beginnings and middles, she seems to be privileging endings over beginnings and middles as the site at which the author's 'authentic vision' is realised. In one short paragraph we see how endings can become a marker of literary quality and genre distinction in the literary industry. Endings carry weight even when – and perhaps particularly when – we refuse to consider them in isolation.

Sutton was not alone in her concern that my concentration on literary endings might misrepresent her work. Alessandro Gallenzi[26] responded to my initial interview request thus:

> I am not sure that I would be able to help you in any sensible way, because we have never made interventions to a book's ending: we tend to respect the authors' vision and, although we work with them to improve the text, we never think in terms of beginning, middle or ending. If we commission a book, it means that we are already happy with its overall structure. I think most publishers would give you a similar answer – it's probably at an earlier stage that the ending is settled or revisited, at times with the help of an agent.

Following further correspondence Gallenzi did in fact agreed to be interviewed and in talking about the process of editing at Alma he was able to provide a more nuanced account of the relationship between structure and artistic vision. Though he remained adamant that 'in fifteen years I've never asked an author to rewrite an ending' he mentioned that on a handful of occasions he has asked authors to look at overall structure and in the case of one recent book, by Alba Arikha, which 'had a troubled history before it

[26] Managing Director, Alma Books

came to us', the ending was changed from the one originally submitted to the publisher by the agent, which turned out to have been forced on to the author with a view to making the book more commercial. Gallenzi explained:

> [T]he first thing we said to her was, you know, we have to go back to the ending that you feel is the ending that the book should have. And so she reverted to the initial, original ending and I felt that it was a very satisfactory, rewarding ending, because it wasn't at all formulaic, the close of a circle, but it was more open-ended and less predictable. So, I felt that going back to the original ending and respecting the author's will and vision was important.

It is worth noting here that the agent and the publisher were split over the question of commercial potential versus artistic integrity. The agent presumably made the suggestion that the ending should be changed on the basis of previous experience of what publishers look for, but in fact, as Gallenzi sees it, the cultural capital of a small literary independent depends on producing work that is not formulaic or predictable and that respects the author's vision.

My interviews with the literary prize judges indicated that endings and the significance attached to them may be a significant marker of distinction between literary prizes. I asked John Sutherland[27] whether, as Chair of Judges for The Booker Prize, he had specified judging criteria. His response was:

> No, no! You couldn't actually. You'd feel so pompous if you put down rules, because the whole thing about fiction is that it's unregulated. Unless it's genre fiction and genre fiction is never […] you know Val McDermid made a gallant effort this year, but genre fiction is not really there. It's got its own prizes.

In contrast, Sam Baker noted that, in all but one of the prizes she had judged,[28] judges were given specific criteria for assessment. Sometimes those criteria are connected to the profile of the prize but Baker was clear that endings are also a common criterion: 'My experience of judging is that nine times out of ten it's the ending that ruins the book, that lets the book down, that's the difference between a book making the longlist and not making the longlist.' She went on to clarify 'I don't remember anyone ever saying that the ending of

[27] Booker Prize judge in 1999 and Chair of Judges in 2005.
[28] The exception is the Desmond Elliott Prize, which according to Baker 'lives up to the spirit of the man. It's completely random, in my opinion.'

this book is so good it must go through, but I definitely remember people saying that the ending is so bad it mustn't go through.'

It seems that endings, and the ways in which they are judged – or not judged – have meaning well beyond their narrative function. Endings demarcate literary fiction but the kind of attention we pay endings also demarcates the literary reader – and I mean reader here in its broadest sense to include agents, editors and prize judges. With that in mind, before focusing in on the work that endings do and the work that is done with them by agents and editors, I take a step back to consider the standpoint from which my interviewees engage in reflective reasoning about the novel and the literary marketplace. I look at how they define their profile as agent or publisher in relation to the distinctions made by the publishing industry between literary fiction, literary crossover fiction (sometimes called sweetspot fiction in the book industry), commercial fiction and genre fiction, and how they express what it is they are looking for.

Genre and Literary Judgement

As we have seen, the term 'literary fiction' is highly contested within the academic literature. My interviews suggest that it is rather less contested within the literary industry, though the borders of 'literary fiction' and 'literary crossover fiction' are slippery. Laura Williams explained:

> What is literary fiction? It can be any and everything. It can be any place, any time, but it just has to be incredibly beautifully written, that's the most important thing, very sophisticated in terms of what it's doing with language and structure and characters. It's a kind of umbrella term for really good books basically – that's the way we look at it anyway.

From Williams's description, I detected no intrinsic reason why literary fiction shouldn't also be commercial and Williams clarified:

> Definitely. Well […] it's often a bit more risky, as opposed to commercial books where you can get sales through supermarkets and that will shift loads; you can get promotions. With literary fiction books, they're often a little bit more quiet. So you're really relying on amazing reviews and prize nominations – that type of thing – to drive sales.

On this definition it seems that literary fiction refers to books whose commercial performance is dependent on exceptional and critically recognised quality rather than, for

example, the appeal of a specific genre of storytelling, author or publisher branding or a marketable hook. The qualities that may make literary fiction a commercial success therefore, tend to become apparent only after publication, whereas commercial fiction is marketed and sold on the basis of a prescribed set of elements and is therefore much more predictable in sales terms.[29] Thus Williams's explanation that though literary fiction is her primary area of interest as an agent 'it doesn't pay the bills really', and although she says 'I always like to have a couple of really literary, beautiful, wonderful things on the go', she also takes on historical fiction and psychological thrillers at the more commercial end. She explained 'I don't really do genre: science fiction or "crimey" crime – that kind of police procedural type thing. I think with stuff like that you have to be a real expert, you have to be really invested.' Her approach to considering literary fiction and commercial fiction does seem to be rather different from the outset:

> With more commercial projects it has to have that kind of initial hook, you have to see your way into the story. When I read submissions I sit there imagining talking to editors about it, and I want to think up something to say that will make editors go 'Sounds amazing!' […] When I read a submission for something more literary, I don't normally read the synopsis before I start actually reading the manuscript or the chapters […} you just start reading and hope you get swept away with it.

Williams described her reaction to a manuscript she had recently received:

> I read the first forty pages instantly and just had that feeling which is so hard to define, you know: beautifully written, intriguing opening, that's it! That's all we want: good setting, good characters, story seemed to go OK when I read the synopsis after I read those chapters. It's just a gut feeling thing, it's so difficult to quantify for literary fiction. But when you know, you know.

It is worth noting Williams's reference to the intriguing opening. As we saw in the extract from Lucy Luck, above, beginnings play a vital role in attracting an agent's attention; endings rarely do. Agents generally make the decision to represent a new author on the basis of potential, demonstrated in a synopsis and sample chapters (and in literary fiction the latter tends to be privileged). At this stage it is enough if, in Williams's words 'the story seemed to go OK.' However, the publisher usually makes the decision to buy a novel – certainly a debut novel – only when they have seen a complete manuscript.[30] Lucy Luck

[29] Sales data from across the publishing industry has been available to publishers since the launch of Nielsen's BookScan in 2000, enabling tracking of the performance of both authors and genres.
[30] It may be that, as Garnons-Williams noted earlier, only the editor has read as far as the ending.

told me that publishers 'do offer for books saying that the ending is a bit shit and will have to be changed [but] you have to have a beginning; […] it's very easy for editors to be distracted. So if in the first fifty pages you haven't got your hook into an editor then you're probably not going to sell the book.' In fact, Garnons-Williams noted that 'when I'm buying debut novels, quite often the ending has been really good. I've finished it and I've come away thinking "this is incredible!" […] I rarely buy a debut novel where I want to do massive structural changes […] because there's so many barriers to you loving it at that stage.' Thus, Garnons-Williams finds that she edits endings by established authors more than those by debut authors, a point to which I will return.

In defining the kind of fiction she is drawn to, Lucy Luck told me that 'every agent has a spectrum anyway, a kind of range of work that they are drawn to, both fiction and nonfiction, but the writing I feel very confident about placing, it's on the literary side. I hope it would be shortlisted for prizes and win prizes.' She is drawn to writing that, above all, 'is very strong on place and voice'. She pointed to Andrew Michael Hurley's book *The Loney* (2015) – a novel of suspense with a Gothic setting, which won the Costa First Novel award in 2015 and the Nibbies in 2016 and is being made into a film – as a book that she understood might be categorised as 'crossover', but notes that she took on Hurley as a client because of the quality of his writing: 'for me it's when everything clicks, there is a clarity to the voice and I completely trust it. And I say that's literary, my taste is literary, everyone knows my taste is literary.'

For Laura Williams that strong sense of voice is one of the defining features of 'that kind of literary-commercial, upmarket crossover point, you know, really well written as well as being marketable […] that sweetspot that everyone talks about.' The appeal of a particular voice is inevitably very personal. Several of my interviewees (Williams, Woods, Garnons-Williams) cited Gail Honeyman's *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* (2017) as a recent example of a highly successful sweetspot novel with a distinctive voice and a clever ending. This book seemed to incite a visceral response: Lucy Luck acknowledged that people whose taste she often shares 'have said it's got a great ending' but she was bemused by its success calling the novel 'the weirdest thing out there.' She explained: 'I read the beginning and I just thought there's no way that I could spend any time with this character because she whinges too much. […] Why would I want to spend any time finding out more about her life when I don't have to?' Laura Williams said: 'I loved *Eleanor Oliphant* but the ending

made me want to throw it across the room. […] Everyone else loves everything about it but for me that ending did not work and that's really coloured it for me.'

Bryony Woods[31] attempted to articulate some of the most important things she looks for in a submission, though she was clear that her list should not be seen as definitive:

> It's hard to narrow it down to a few specific things. Generally I am looking for beautiful, distinctive writing, something that stands out from the crowd. I'm looking for characters that leap off the page, that seem like real people, whose actions are the actions of real people and not being forced by the narrative. Just something to either shed a new light on the way that we live, or take me away from the way that we live in terms of setting or genre. Something that makes me think.

Woods touches here on the need for both an affective and an intellectual response to what she is reading, but above all something that distinguishes the submission from the dozens of others she reads every day. Structural elements are not mentioned, except in her observation that character should drive narrative rather than vice versa. It is this, to Woods, that defines the distinction between literary and genre fiction:

> With literary fiction it's more character driven and with crime and thriller it's more plot driven. So, with something like *Gone Girl*, for example, the author is in full control and you're just going along and seeing what they show you. Whereas in literary fiction you're more immersed in the puzzle of it […] so you're presented with all the different pieces of the story and you're being shown those pieces coming together in different ways but you're also teasing the reader a bit more and getting them to try and engage with it on a different level.

The view that genre fiction is plot-driven while literary fiction is character-driven seems to be widely held in the industry. It was reiterated by Jenny Savill (2019),[32] who said: 'commercial fiction has a very strong plot, very accessible, relatable characters; literary fiction has less of a plot and is more into the inner life of the characters'. It is notable that this view was not shared by either of the genre novelists interviewed for the previous chapter, who were both of the view that character is always the central element in engaging the reader and maintaining their trust, though Woods' view that one of the definitions of literary fiction is an expectation of much more engaged intellectual participation is coherent with critical debates as well as with observations made by the

[31] Literary agent, Diamond Kahn & Woods (DKW)
[32] Literary agent at Andrew Nurnberg Associates

novelists in the previous chapter, notably Wyl Menmuir. In fact, Woods' preferences, in terms of the work she seeks to represent, are not especially restricted by genre:

> It's is only really relevant to me in terms of which editors I'm going to send it to. I particularly like books that defy categorisation, for example, I have a real soft spot for magic realism. So I will tend to go for books that aren't quite fantasy, aren't quite science fiction, but aren't straight enough to be considered literary fiction at the same time. So I'm always thinking, well, how do I package this? Who do I send it to? And I will usually end up sending it to a mixture of editors of literary fiction and editors of science fiction and fantasy. And I will see who goes for it.

Woods' is a pragmatic rather than an exclusionary sense of genre. What emerged from the interviews was a clear sense of agents making decisions not only, and perhaps not even primarily on the basis of critical or commercial judgements about quality, genre or saleability, but on the basis of their own taste, and a projection from that of what may appeal to other readers, whether they be editors or 'ordinary' readers. It was hard for Woods to give a detailed analysis of what she looks for as an agent just as it would be hard for any reader of fiction to predict what would move them or excite them when they read.

Fourth Estate is known as the 'literary imprint' of Harper Collins and Helen Garnons-Williams elaborated on what this meant in terms of their publishing:

> Literary in the same way that we bandy around literary and commercial; [...] they're meaningless except in theory we should be producing books that sometimes win prizes and in which the quality of the writing has always got to be of a certain standard. That standard is obviously deeply subjective, but […] we don't do genre fiction. Within that, the spectrum is vast. And for me, my taste is very broad within that spectrum.

She pointed to her work with Jon McGregor, whom she described as 'one of the most literary writers out there […] experimental and beautiful and I think he's a genius', but noted 'I also go down – down is a subjective term as well! – I'll do more reading group type novels, in that kind of sweetspot that everyone's aiming for now, because if you get it right, if it's *Eleanor Oliphant* or whatever it might be, you can sell a million copies of it.' In defining her literary taste, like the literary agents previously quoted, Garnons-Williams began with the importance of a distinctive and exciting voice and she also stressed the importance of storytelling:

> I like people who can tell stories, which sounds facile to anyone outside the industry, but there are lots of novels in which story is not [developed]. I want to try

> and separate the idea that readability and page turning are bad things. I think all reader want to be able to read and turn the pages, and all writers presumably want readers to turn their pages!

For Garnons-Williams, it is important that story should not be seen as the preserve of commercial fiction; and she connected this with the importance of making an emotional connection, even in literary novels with clear intellectual appeal. She gave two examples: George Saunders' *Lincoln in the Bardo* (2017), which she argued was compelling not only because it was brilliantly conceived but because it 'had real heart [. . .] it's about emotional connection' and Hilary Mantel's Cromwell Trilogy. Garnons-Williams explained that the novels she most admires are those where intellectuality is worn lightly: 'novels that are much cleverer than you think they are – those are the really skilled writers I think: that depth!' However she described her decision to acquire a novel as based on an emotional and indeed physical response to the text rather than for example on more detached critical or commercial judgements:

> For me it's absolutely visceral and I have to remind myself when I'm say, right now, in the run up to Frankfurt when I'm reading dozens and dozens of manuscripts […] that I shouldn't try and buy them unless I'm pretty much shaking. The novels that I love literally make me kind of shake.

It is notable that the intensity of the reading period leading up to industry's largest annual buying and selling event led her away from a commercially mediated response and back, firmly, towards her own tastes and instincts. The role of the editor is a complex one, balanced between the field of artistic creation and the field of commercial production. In their dealings with authors, editors are always likely to stress their affinity with the former; nonetheless publishing is a process of 'making public' that requires skilful navigation of the marketplace.

Juliet Mabey[33] publishes a fiction list at Oneworld comprising intelligent literary novels from around the world. Though the fiction list was launched only in 2009, Mabey's authors have won the Booker Prize twice – in 2015 with *A Brief History of Seven Killings* by Marlon James and in 2016 with *The Sellout* by Paul Beatty. In talking about what attracted her to a submission Mabey told me:

[33] Publisher and co-founder of Oneworld Publications

> For me the ending probably isn't the most important thing. […] I'm really looking for a voice that I want to stay with for a novel. Everyone's different: […] for me, it's more the voice, and the originality of the idea, and structure. Because I do quite a lot of fiction I like things that aren't samey.

As we heard from Lucy Luck earlier, a distinctive voice seems to be a common feature in many of the agents' and publishers' accounts of what attracts them to a writer. But, in saying she likes things that aren't 'samey', Mabey was not only making a point about personal taste or a desire not to have too much overlap between books on the list; she related it to Oneworld's distinctive publishing identity and commitment to representing global experiences and unheard voices: 'There's a lot of places people would be very willing to go in a novel that they would not read a non-fiction book on. […] It's not didactically teaching you things, but it's taking you places and opening the world in a way that is appealing.' The idea of judgement being shaped by the publisher's vision of their literary identity is something I will return to at the end of the chapter in discussing the idea of the publisher as 'attuned reader'.

Evaluative Perspectives on Endings

I open this section with four extracts illustrating the ways in which my interviewees value and evaluate endings in literary fiction:

> What really stays with you [is] that moment of reflection at the end of the story. It's really important, whether it's like a beautiful line, or a beautiful image or a kind of feeling, or something to reflect upon: some kind of theme that's come up. Mulling on a book for days afterwards, wondering what happens to the characters next […] that's where that bit of ambiguity is quite good. You don't necessarily end at the end; you end at an ending point that leaves you wanting more.
> (Laura Williams)

> I like […] books where the author is puzzling out something and often then surprising you at the end with their – not necessarily a big reveal – but it transmigrates into something different. It's the intellectualism that I find appealing in fiction.
> (Juliet Mabey)

> What I think you want to go for, in literary fiction, is a slow revelation. […] You want all the different pieces of the story to sort of slowly come together in a way that the reader isn't necessarily expecting, but you wouldn't define it as a twist because you're challenging the reader to spot how it's coming together.
> (Bryony Woods)

> The novel is by its nature a messy form, and longer novels especially cannot be expected to have a perfect ending. In my early career I had a preference for the small, exquisite novel – almost like poetry – but as time goes on I appreciate a wide range of different forms, and rarely are more ambitious novels ever perfect in every way.
> (Alexandra Pringle)[34]

Clearly there are a range of ending preferences here: some respondents seek affective engagement and others intellectual engagement. There is considerable overlap with the novelists' accounts in Williams' suggestion that affect may reside in the final image, feeling, or single line, and the repetition of an idea that an ambiguous ending enables the sense of a world continuing. Williams' account is also interesting in the distinction she makes between an 'ending point' and an 'end'. Woods' and Mabey's comments on challenging the reader to a new understanding recall the effect that Wyl Menmuir described as his aim in writing *The Many*. It is notable that Alexandra Pringle, from a perspective of having acquired and edited work by many of the heavy-hitters of contemporary fiction,[35] is the most open about her taste in endings. Her reference to the 'small, exquisite novel' suggests the length of the novel may be a factor in terms of its form.

Most respondents did express some personal preference for a degree of openness or closure. While critical of overly neat endings Bryony Woods had equal concerns about radical openness, suggesting that this may also break the reader's trust:

> If it's completely open, is that an ending at all? I think you need to feel that the author is in control, and that you can trust them to take you somewhere specific at the end, which is the place they'd always intended to take you. […] If you feel like you're stranded in the middle of a moor at the end and you think 'Is this where I was supposed to end up?' then it can be a bit baffling.

One key question is how much agents' and editors' personal taste informs their professional judgement. As I conducted the interviews it became increasingly clear that agents and editors engage in a complex process of reading, switching between personal response to the text as a reader, which may be both an emotional and visceral reaction and a pragmatic professional reaction. Helen Garnons-Williams explained how this process might impact on the need to edit an ending: 'I'll have half made a decision in my head if I

[34] Group Editor-in-Chief for Bloomsbury at the time of the interview
[35] e.g. William Boyd, Margaret Atwood, Richard Ford, George Saunders, Kamila Shamsie, Jhumpa Lahiri, Colum McCann

love a novel fifty pages in […] and then I will hope it doesn't fall apart. And if it does, I will think "well, I'll have to try and fix that"'. She elaborated:

> I don't think I've ever bought a book where I think it [the ending] doesn't work at all. Most common is when I think it hasn't actually ended properly. They [the author] will have rushed it. What I think often happens is that writers will have spent a very long time at the beginning of their novels and they will have got an idea and then they're not sure how to conclude it and so they tend to shut things down very quickly.

Garnons-Williams' frequent response is to want to 'play it at more length'. As an example, she mentioned editing a new novel by Lucie Whitehouse, with an ending that she thought was too rushed: 'It just all collapsed […] you're been building to this climax and then things happened really quickly.' In her notes she advised Whitehouse: 'I just want you to take another beat here [. . .] your character needs to pause and take a breath here, or we need to see a reaction. You need to build the climax and let it breathe more.' She added: 'I could really feel it, the pacing!'

In common with several interviewees in this and the preceding chapter, Garnons-Williams explained that she often understands endings in terms of music:

> For me it almost feels like music at the end. I feel the pacing is wrong or that a beat needs to last longer. It feels like music going wrong or right. Maybe it's because I went to music school so it's the way I think about it. Coming to the end of a piece, it's also how you end with a bang not a whimper.

She suggested that music is good at endings because it is performative, seeking applause at its conclusion, though she added that 'in fiction the best things make me want to applaud'.

The rushed ending may be a sign that the author's provisional ending is more a stage in the writing than a definitive conclusion. Lucy Luck explained that: 'writers of novels tend to write the ending before they've written the rest of the book because it's the endpoint that you're getting to that drives you writing the rest of the story'. Laura Williams agreed, noting that in her experience this was particularly the case for early career novelists:

> There have definitely been a few times when I've read the submission, got really excited about it, read the ending and gone 'OK, definitely not that! But we'll fix that, don't worry about it.' […] For the majority I find that authors know where a book is going to end up and that's kind of a really important point for them as they're writing it. [. . .] Writers who are a little bit more confident are more inclined

> to kind of start writing and maybe see how these characters develop, or whatever, but I think if you're writing your first novel, authors know where it's going to end up because otherwise they wouldn't have embarked upon it.

Again, we have the suggestion that having a well worked-out ending is integral to commercial fiction: the ending may be the motivation for writing in the first place, it may be important in influencing whether the book is acquired and it may have a significant impact on its success (thus the #WTFthatending hashtag for Sarah Pinborough's book). Both the role of and the mode of ending is necessarily less defined with respect to literary fiction. This may affect the mode of editing. Laura Williams explained that:

> I worked on a book really recently that had a twist for the first time. That was a really interesting thing because normally I edit with my heart, but this was very much a kind of practical exercise: what does the reader know when? – all the kind of technical details. So it was a much more kind of practical [edit] than 'Oh, I don't know whether this should…', you know, editing from your feelings.

The phrase 'edit with my heart' is telling here, suggesting a much more affective approach to endings in literary fiction: they should feel right and (to return to the musical analogy) sound right. Of all the agents, Williams was perhaps the most wary of an over-analytical approach on the part of the author:

> There are things that I've gone 'this just doesn't work at all, you've tried to be too clever!' Whereas if it's working it just feels right. […] You don't want the reader to be going 'Oh wasn't that a sophisticated plot device?' I just want them to be reading it! It's that 'making writing not feel like writing' thing, it's making a book not feel like a literary enterprise. It comes back to really good storytelling, really authentic and really believable. You're just kind of swept up in it so you don't think about the fact that you are reading a book. You are just in it.

Several respondents echoed Williams' focus on the need for 'authenticity' in storytelling. For Bryony Woods, one way in which an ending loses authenticity is when the ending is entirely resolved: 'If something doesn't ring true that's always going to be a bit of a problem. A lot of the time if something's tied up too neatly then I'm not quite happy with it as an ending because it doesn't feel real, it doesn't feel plausible.' The consensus seemed to be that, in Juliet Mabey's words, 'in literary fiction it can be a mistake to tie up too many ends', indeed the suggestion was that doing so almost instantly labels a book as 'commercial fiction.' Sam Baker was especially critical of:

> that pat ending that needs to be all sewn up in a bow, which I really, really don't think readers need. […] I think a lot of readers could take more ambiguity. An end

> doesn't have to be all neatly tied up in the book, which is a mistake I would say some editors make, but it does need to provide closure. And you can provide closure without being neat.

Baker ascribes the 'mistake' firmly to editors not to authors here. Drawing on her own experience as a novelist she argued that otherwise good novels are too often fatally marred by over-zealous editing. She gave the example of *The Thirteenth Tale* by Diane Setterfield (2006), which concludes with an epilogue she regards as unnecessary and jarring:

> I can't bear an epilogue, I have to say, unless there's a really good reason for it: 'a year later he is getting married. . .' – I can't stand that! […] For me as a writer and a judge I don't need or want that. You aren't allowed to have any imagination. You aren't allowed to ponder what might come next because the book ends and then it's like 'just in case you were wondering…'. It's so, so annoying.

Playing with the Reader's Expectations

Laura Williams expressed a personal preference for some degree of resolution in fictional endings. She acknowledged that 'a certain amount of ambiguity is absolutely fine if it's a kind of book club conversation, of "what do you think happened?"' but she expressed particular frustration with books that pose a central mystery and resist explanation. She gave the example of Charlotte Wood's *The Natural Way of Things* (2015) which she saw as failing to 'answer the question that the reader has been asking since page one. […] To me that completely undermines the whole. [...] It was beautifully written but such a let-down'. She nonetheless recognised a spectrum of reader responses to such books: 'I think there's a line, and if ambiguity is here, and resolution is over here, somewhere in the middle is being able to read something both ways, and then I think people's personal preference wavers somewhere on either side of that line.' Helen Garnons-Williams made a similar point, arguing that 'readers can like stuff being left open, or they [can] feel like they've been cheated – I think that's a fine line'. She pointed to what in her view is a successful example of an unresolved novel: Jon McGregor's *Reservoir 13* (2017):

> That plays with readers' expectations. They go into it thinking it's about a missing girl and they think they're going to find out what happened to her, and the whole point is that they don't find out what happens to her, because he's not writing a mystery novel or a detective novel. He's writing about life and about the way that life is and that things aren't answered. I loved that uncertainty and that, in inverted

> commas, unsatisfying ending. […] I didn't change the ending on that. I changed very little of it. I think it's an incredible novel.

Similarly, Lucy Luck recalled working on Donna Tartt's second novel *The Little Friend* (2002), noting that when it was sent to UK publishers it was only three quarters finished:

> Everyone went absolutely mad for it, as you can imagine. […] But there was a sense of surprise amongst those who then read the final manuscript and readers that she didn't tie up what she'd started with, that you never got the answers, and you've got to be very careful upending all your readers' expectations. With *The Little Friend*, at the end there's a very dramatic moment when Harriet nearly dies […] in the water tub. But we are never told if the man she is with is innocent or guilty, and not knowing that makes the story feel slightly unfinished. I would happily have spent more time with Harriet and I wanted to see the conclusion of those particular events and how it affected her.

Despite these reservations Luck was clear that she loves *The Little Friend* and regards Donna Tartt as brilliant; she noted only that 'you have to be careful about not ending a novel in a conventional way, that you provide some emotional satisfaction.'

This example points to the paradox that while endings are important to most readers, the books that make most impact are very often those that subvert both rules and expectations, and that are not afraid of alienating readers (or indeed editors). Sam Baker noted that at what she called the 'top end' of literary fiction:

> [T]he ending often is not the most important thing about a book. Take *Lincoln in the Bardo* for instance. It's wonderful, an amazing book, but the editing is quite interesting because it actually just stops. [That's] because it's one night. It's good, it's got a really good ending, it's worth reading for the ending.

Laura Williams mentioned the same novel:

> I bet if you said to anyone, like '*Lincoln in the Bardo*, right? How does that book end?' They'd go 'Um, uh'. But everyone remembers exactly how that book was written and the general gist of that story. But, the actual ending of it? Something like that is so original and innovative and exciting, I think that's much less about the ending than a lot of other things are going to be. It doesn't need to be huge – like big, explosive.

In this context, it is interesting to consider Alessandro Gallenzi's view that in looking at recent successes in literary fiction, the concept of the novel and its opening have often been more important than the ending:

> As a publisher of literary fiction […] I would say that the beginning of a book is more important than the ending. I can tell you that among many of the recent great success stories, for example *The Hundred- Year-Old Man who Climbed out of the Window and Disappeared*, *Life of Pi*, and *We Need to Talk about Kevin*, many of these books have a strong beginning and a strong central concept, a simple idea that the reader can get, and they start reading it and they don't ask questions. If you believe in the story in the beginning, you enjoy the journey whatever the ending.

Gallenzi went on to make the point that within the literary canon, endings are often not what is remembered and admired about a book, indeed he suggests that significant flaws are no barrier to canonicity:

> As a publisher of classics […] two among the most famous ones have probably the strongest beginning and the weakest ending. I would say *The Divine Comedy*, where everyone reads the 'Inferno' and it's got such a strong beginning and no one reads the 'Paradiso'; and *The Master and Margarita* where the ending doesn't make sense: […] he didn't have time to revise it and put it in a tight shape, it wasn't published and therefore it didn't benefit from any editorial checks. […] It still remains one of the most read and loved modern classics, because it's got that beginning that's unlike anything else in literature.

In talking about the role of the Booker Prize in canon-creation John Sutherland noted the mystery of why some books survive to be read generation after generation but most are 'on a very quick one-way ticket to oblivion'. In his view, books do not necessarily become classics because of literary quality: 'In fact it's a bit like the lottery; […] one or two books a decade will enter that pantheon but its unpredictable and hazardous'. Whether or not one agrees with Gallenzi's assessment of the endings of *The Divine Comedy* or *The Master and Margarita*, it is evident that classic status is not always endowed on brilliantly edited books with perfect structure. Helen Garnons-Williams' despair that readers of *The Miniaturist* did not notice the editorial failings at its ending, points to the fact that there is never a guarantee about the value of the most detailed editorial work in shaping books that catch the readers' imagination or that are read twenty or fifty years later. Gallenzi concluded his argument by suggesting that his point was 'valid for […] the high end of literary fiction' and for full-length novels: 'for more commercial fiction […] it's a lot more important because I think one of the main rewards is that at the end of everything all the strands tie together nicely and the story feels plausible and the ending is powerful'. He also believed that endings were much more important in the short story form: 'You would not forgive the author for not giving you a good ending. […] I'm thinking of some of the most successful stories by Chekhov or Carver. They give you either that twist or resolution that makes you

want to read it all over again immediately and it will stay with you.' Relatedly, and reiterating a point raised by Alexandra Pringle about the 'small exquisite novel', he argued: 'the shorter the novel, I think the more important the ending is.'

Critical Affinity

Gallenzi described his mission with Alma as 'try[ing] to keep the flame alive'. I understood this as a dual commitment to literary quality and keeping the publisher going. In practice, for Gallenzi, this means that: 'You have to be nimble, being able to publish faster than bigger publishers and putting more work on the ground […] and the second thing is to be able to add editorial value: that is an even rarer skill but smaller publishers such as Galley Beggar and Alma are able to add editorial value.' Alma's specialist engagement with books they believe in has enabled them to make a success of books other publishers may not have had time to work on. Gallenzi cited Rosie Alison's *The Very Thought of You* (2011):

> [It] had clear structural problems that we worked on, two editors worked on that: first Mike Stocks and then myself. It was a long, long process and many other publishers simply wouldn't have taken it on. [It] had been rejected by a couple of dozen publishers. But when it was published and then it became a bestseller many said 'Oh, that book! Yes it was a great book, had potential.'

Gallenzi's account of adding value to a book project suggests the importance to the editorial process of a particular kind of understanding between author and agent or editor. There is an element beyond both personal taste and the question of how easy or difficult the author is to edit, which Laura Williams expressed particularly clearly:

> That's the most exciting thing for me, that feeling of reading something and going: 'this is not in any way perfect; it's not even close to perfect, but I know how to fix this. I know how to make it better.' Sometimes I read things and I know I wouldn't be the right agent for it even if I think it's good or workable. And then sometimes you read something and you are like 'me specifically, I must be the one to help with this because I know exactly what to do!'

I would describe this as a sense of critical affinity, and I regard it as a helpful concept in understanding the ideal relationship between an author and their agent/editor but also in understanding the relationship between personal taste and editorial decision-making. It clearly relates to taste, but it is rooted in an ability to read simultaneously as a friend and

confidante, as a critic and as a surrogate for the ordinary reader. I will return to a detailed exploration of this tripartite understanding of agents' and editors' literary reading, but I want to consider the concept of critical affinity by reference to Williams' account of what she describes as the most collaborative editorial experience of her career thus far, with Barney Norris (interviewed in the previous chapter). Williams recalls the initial experience of reading Norris's submission:

> He primarily wrote plays […] and then he wrote a novel and sent it to me and I was like: 'This isn't working – but you are wonderful. Let's go and have a chat about the novel you should actually be writing.' And we worked on that together for about eighteen months, which was a wonderful thing because Barney can write like a dream: he just didn't know how to write a novel yet. So we just kind of figured it out together. […] Obviously you can't do that with every project because that took an enormous amount of time. But for someone like Barney, who is so talented and who I believed in so wholeheartedly, it was totally worth it.

She notes 'that book did really well, which was a total surprise because honestly it's the most literary, rural, lovely, quiet, beautiful book. And it was part word of mouth, part really good reviews, prize nominations and stuff, just kind of building and building.' For Norris's second book, *Turning for Home* (2018), the editorial process was very different, because Norris had the bones of the idea and started writing it, but it was a very personal book for the author and he needed emotional support rather than close editing; while with his third book, *The Vanishing Hours* (2019), which, as discussed in the preceding chapter, appeared to Norris almost fully formed, in a flash of inspiration, Norris did not send anything to Williams before the complete first draft, but she was still his first reader. She noted 'there's still, from that very early stage, that kind of trust there. Not that he doesn't trust his editor […] I think just I'm the first pair of eyes on it, which I'm really excited about.'

Good relationships between publishers and authors are often based on a similar sense of critical affinity. Helen Garnons-Williams told me that she has sometimes won a book auction where the money was the same because the author has felt they had a connection with her as editor. She recalled a recent conversation with an agent: 'She thinks it's so important when she's taking authors round, to see that there's an editorial connection; when she sees the author and the editor talking at text level among all the other song and dance, it really matters.' Gordon Wise mentioned that this process was often managed at an early stage by the agent:

> In the lucky situation that you've got more than one party interested […] you will think about whether that author's going to respond to that editor's editorial style. Sometimes that will mean not submitting that book to that publishing house because you don't see it as being a happy marriage. 'So and so just never gets these sorts of things even though that environment would be a great place in which to publish.' That's definitely part of our role.

Three Modes of Reading

A common feature of my interviews with literary agents, editors and prize judges is that all were clear to describe themselves as readers, rather than for example, as representatives of a cultural industry, gatekeepers or critics. For Bryony Woods, for example: 'the perspective of an agent isn't very different from […] the perspective of a reader because I am at heart a reader. And if I'm reading something as an agent, I'm still a reader as well and I have to sort of remind myself that I have to keep in mind what it would feel like if I wasn't reading it for work.' While describing herself as 'at heart a reader' there is nonetheless a performative element to Woods' self-conception in the fact that she has to 'sort of remind herself' how she would be responding as a non-professional reader, suggesting that the role of agent as reader is more complex than it might first appear. There certainly seems to be a clear divide between the criticality of academic reading and the more emotionally engaged reading experience described by my interviewees.[36] Helen Garnons-Williams noted this at the beginning of our interview:

> I went to Cambridge and did an English degree – did my Henry James, did my history of the novel. That's entirely different from the way I read books now and it's almost completely separate to my job, so much so that sometimes I'll go along to an author's event or read an interview with them – and this will be for a book that I've worked on and spent a year and a half reading and talking about with them, helping them revise it – and someone in the audience will ask them about themes in the novel and they'll answer, and I'll think 'Oh Christ! I didn't know that at all!' And I realise that I am responding to it in a completely different way. When you're doing it as an undergraduate you're going in looking for the themes […] and that's not how readers respond to books in the real world.

Having heard this, I wanted to develop a clearer understanding of how literary professionals read and how this informs their decision-making and their response to endings. Garnons-Williams' phrase 'that's not how readers respond to books in the real

[36] With the partial exception of John Sutherland who, as an academic and literary critic, had a primarily (but not exclusively) intellectual and critical approach to his role as a Booker judge.

world', implies that, like Bryony Woods, she understands herself as a representative of 'the ordinary reader'. I certainly saw elements of that in the interviews; for example, there is little sense of the academic separation of feeling and judgement in these responses, thus Helen Garnons-Williams' admission that 'for me it's absolutely visceral and I have to remind myself […] that I shouldn't try to buy [a book] unless I'm pretty much shaking.' Nonetheless I understood the reading experience for these professional groups to be more complex and more self-conscious than the phrase 'ordinary reader' suggests.

One immediate difference between professional readers and readers as fans is the sheer volume of reading. Juliet Mabey noted that in contrast to non-fiction editors, who tend to acquire on the strength of a proposal and sample chapters: 'For fiction you are literally inundated with full manuscripts, sometimes 220,000 words [and] you do have to read it!' Sam Baker defined the 'general reader' as 'people who don't read five or six books a month like us, or twelve in my case.'[37] There were frequent references to the search for something that gives you pause within an unwieldy pile of reading; this may be 'a voice that makes me think "Gosh, this is exciting"' (Helen Garnons-Williams) or 'one of the most extraordinary beginnings […] so engrossing' (Alessandro Gallenzi's account of reading Rosie Alison's *The Very Thought of You*) or it may be a brilliant ending as in Laura Williams' account below:

> I think, you want that feeling – this is me as a reader – when you find yourself slowing down towards the end of reading a book because you don't want it to end. And then that – which only happens really, really, rarely – you close the last page of a book and you sort of take a minute. You know, that real sense of closure, of finishing something wonderful for the first time. Do you know what I mean? Especially when you read as much as people who work in publishing do. You're 'Right! Zoom zoom zoom! Next thing! I'm off!' And that's the real importance of a book, that's the reverence of it, that kind of closing.

By 'this is me as a reader' Williams is referring to her response as an 'ordinary reader' rather than as a professional reader. But drawing attention to her dual status is an act of critical distancing, allowing her to reflect that this kind of 'real reader' response is especially unusual when you are a professional who is obliged to read in enormous volume and is simply trying to get through a huge pile of reading. She then moves back into reader-as-fan mode with 'that's the real importance of a book, that's the reverence of it'. There is a double-consciousness at work here in her deep admiration for and involvement in the

[37] Baker added that she reads many more than this when she is judging a book prize.

effects of the novel, but her ability nonetheless to stand back to observe those effects on her and understand their meaning. What Williams is seeking as an agent is an ending that makes her forget her professional role and revert, albeit temporarily, to fan mode. And what is interesting is that her critical and commercial judgements are connected to the book's ability to do this.

My interviews pointed to three distinct modes of reading engaged in by agents and publishers which might be understood as:

a. Agent/publisher as first reader
b. Agent/publisher as critical reader
c. Agent/publisher as attuned reader.

a. First Reader

For many authors (e.g. Carthew, Fuller) their agent is literally their first reader. This role may encompass the idea of the 'ordinary' reader or 'fan' but it goes beyond it to embrace the notion of critical affinity, suggesting a strong personal relationship, a shared sensibility and an attunement to language, as illustrated in Laura Williams account of being the 'first pair of eyes' on Barney Norris's third novel. For Helen Garnons-Williams: 'It's all about trust with an editor. You have to believe that – obviously the intentions are the same – but that they love your book as much as you do and therefore want the best for it, and have the same kind of vision for it.' The role of 'first reader' isn't necessarily confined to the agent's first reading of the complete manuscript; they may also be the first pair of eyes on later drafts. Laura Williams explained:

> If the author gets their edits from the editor and they have any concerns or they want me to have a read of what they've done before we send it over – because they're sometimes a bit scared of their editors before they get to know them well, whereas they're not scared of me at all – that's kind of my role.
> .

There is an understanding of the agent as the author's champion, whose role is to mediate in the case of any disagreements between author and editor, or (more commonly) between UK and US editors.

Sometimes the editor rather than the agent may have the primary role as first reader. This is common at independent publishers, where editors have intense creative involvement and not all authors are agented, and it is common with established authors who have

published several books with the same editor (such as Lucie Whitehouse and Jon McGregor with Helen Garnons-Williams). But even at an early career stage, editors and agents vary considerably in their approach. In my interview for Chapter Four, Imogen Robertson told me: 'my first agent really didn't have much input creatively at all' but 'my editor at Headline was superb […] she's had a massive influence on every bit of every book.' Garnons-Williams suggested that the need for an agent or publisher as the first pair of eyes on the manuscript tended to be an early career phenomenon: 'The more experienced they get, they have other readers as well, you know they're in the network of literary types, so quite often I'll find that several prize winning authors have read it before I have which can be a bit disconcerting if I disagree with them!' In this case, the editor is moving straight into the second mode, of critical reader.

b. Critical Reader

For some agents and editors the critical reading stage is a continuation from their response to the novel as first reader. Wyl Menmuir described Nicholas Royle's attempts to nudge him in the right direction by sending him parcels of other authors' books. Juliet Mabey noted a similar approach from one of her colleagues at Oneworld: 'She tends to [say] "Oh, to get the beginning right I would recommend you read these four books", and for some authors that seems to work but I wouldn't be confident that's quite enough handholding.' Laura Williams suggested that there is a learned discipline to shifting between the modes of first reader and critical reader:

> I think that's definitely something we train our brains to do as people who edit, rather than people who just read, to try and get that perspective back a bit, because you can only obviously have a first read on something once but you can kind of teach yourself to apply that distance to your reading of it.

She also suggested that creating a temporal distance between different readings can help the editing process:

> It happened with Barney [Norris] actually, because he's so bloody fast at writing. I'd done an edit for him and he sent me back a new draft ten days later. And I was like 'Barney, I'm going to wait another week before I read this because I know I'm too close to the last draft now. I need a bit more space.' We wouldn't normally say to our authors, I'm not going to do the work that I'm supposed to do right now but I knew that I would do a better job with a bit more distance.

Lucy Luck suggested that how the agent and author work together editorially is

‘a large part of what makes a successful relationship between author and agent and if a relationship isn't working then that's mostly the reason for it.’ She noted that the transition from first reader to critical reader involved careful handling:

> The author has normally written four or five, or probably more drafts before that, so me coming in and saying ‘Right, well, I think we should revise it three more times’, you know, it's interesting! But we talk about that and then get it to a point where I'm like ‘Ok, I feel confident’ or as confident as one can in literary fiction.

Bryony Woods expressed a similar process: ‘As a reader I would just think, well that doesn’t work for me and move on from it […] as an agent I have more responsibility to the author, to say this is specifically why I don't think this ending works.’ In contrast to Garnons-Williams, for Woods her skills as a critical reader do draw on her background studying English literature and have their origins in a naturally critical approach to her reading: ‘I've always thought about books that way to a certain extent. […] Even before I was at university I always thought of myself as an English student and thought about things very critically.’

c. Attuned Reader

Where the first mode of reading is about a personal response to the book; the second mode involves more critical distance but is still book-focused, involving negotiations (or conversations) between author and editor; the third mode applies an external focus. Agents and publishers must anticipate the response of book audiences. While in some senses the agent or editor is a ‘reader surrogate’ in the first mode; the third mode is about positioning the book for a range of readers, which may encompass existing fans of the author and new readers, book groups real and virtual, international audiences, literary reviewers and prize judges and even film and television producers. One aspect of ‘attunement’ concerns the question of responsibility to the reader raised earlier. For Garnons-Williams:

> I think very few novels succeed if they leave a bad taste in the mouth […] if you’ve been fully emotionally engaged and you’ve loved characters, to make them behave at the end in a way that makes us feel deeply disappointed in them and to shut off the empathy is really bad. What you choose to tell in this last bit is really interesting.

Garnons-Williams described checking her own response to the endings of published novels she found problematic against ‘actual’ reader responses. She recalled doing this after

reading *The Miniaturist* (2014) and again after reading Kate Atkinson's *A God in Ruins* (2015), which has a destabilising ending that Garnons-Williams considered came close to undermining the bond of trust between author and reader. It is clearly important to her as an editor to regularly 'calibrate' her own instinct against the wider field. She pointed out that tastes and expectations are not fixed; they vary culturally and they vary over time, citing *The Lovely Bones* by Alice Sebold (2002): 'If you were to read it now there's so much wrong with it, but to read it at the time I could see why people loved it.'

It should be stressed that the three modes of reading are not stages in the consideration or editing of a book. Agents, editors and prize judges operate simultaneously within different modes of reading; they may need to switch between these modes within a single sitting and they may not always notice they're doing it. This multi-focal perspective is evident from the first moment that the agent considers a new submission:

> I certainly need to respond to the story very warmly and have a sense of how it will sell, but just enjoy the reading. […] So it's that visceral reaction. All the time […] you're like a switchboard operator, you're thinking who would I put that call through to? Who would like this kind of writing? And also from an agent's perspective you're thinking about a writer's career, so ideally you're looking for things that will not only work in this market […] you definitely have an eye to what might work in America and what would work in translation and also what would work for film and television: […] does it feel like the kind of story people like to consume right now? […] It's not that everyone has to tick all those boxes but I would be meditating on that whilst reading.
> (Gordon Wise)

What is apparent here is the complexity of the agent's thought process. Agents and publishers are 'literary fans', and they perform the role of literary fans, because this is how they sign authors, but they must also be simultaneously commercially and critically attuned in different ways. Furthermore, the way in which professionals occupy different reader positions is informed by their roles. The editor is closer to the book market than the agent: they have daily contact with publicity staff and sales representatives for example, but as Wise suggested, the agent is more likely to be thinking about the author's whole career and also needs to consider film and TV rights which are often handled separately by the agency. Laura Williams recalled that:

> With one of my books the editor came back and said 'there aren't enough female characters', and another one of my books the editor came back and said 'we need more diverse characters'. And I thought it was so interesting because I think that's

> a real kind of publisher as opposed to agent thing. I was thinking so specifically about the book and making sure everything worked, and they're thinking more broadly about the audience.

Here, then, we have a dialogue between two different modes of reading, the agent representing a critical perspective and the publisher the attuned perspective. In this case both perspectives could be accommodated but there are sometimes more intractable tensions between the three different modes of reading, which may play out in differences of opinion between author and editor or between publishing staff in different territories. Helen Garnons-Williams recalled a recent discussion with the American editor of a new novel:

> [It] had quite an open ending, and Americans in my experience do not like that half as much as we do. So the editor had said 'I want him to give us some more answers' and the alarm bells went off! I thought: 'Not if you're going to bring about a meeting between two people who should never meet!'

In this case, Garnons-Williams negotiated and convinced the editor to pull back on his suggestions. However, she mentioned a different occasion 'a novel […] that was bought for a lot of money in the States and, I've never had that experience before, when essentially their sales director came in and edited it, and leaned very heavily on the editor there, to such an extent that the author was kind of broken by it.' Sales directors are by definition market-attuned; editors and agents perform a role which demands mediation between the field of creation and the fields of consumption and reception. It seems that the ability to shift between different modes of reading of is one of their key strategies for negotiating this difficult territory.

Negotiating Endings

As discussed above, literary agents are often the first outside pair of eyes on a novel. The process of editing can be very intensive at this stage, especially (though not exclusively) for debut novelists. Laura Williams noted that 'I tend to do more editorial work than editors do in general, sometimes by a long way.' One of the key reasons for this is that, as Williams explained:

> We're not on a deadline. I can edit until it's done, whereas when an editor buys a book they're going: 'We're going to publish at this time, which means we need to

> do proofs at this time, which means it needs to go to copy edit at this time.' That's quite a lot of pressure!

However, it is also significant that Williams and Bryony Woods are early-career agents. Agents with a long-established client list may be pragmatic about the level of editorial intervention they offer, leaving more of the hands-on editing to the editor, who may have different ideas and who is ultimately responsible for working with the author to produce the novel in its final published form.

With these procedural differences in mind, in this section I look first at first agents' and then editors' accounts of working with authors on endings:

a. Agents

Laura Williams admitted 'I think I tend to do more editorial work than editors do in general, sometimes by a long way', with endings frequently a point of attention. She recalled a recent example of her work with an author:

> I've been working on a novel recently and before I sold it we were doing a lot of editorial work because it was worth it, to get it really right. And the ending is a short, kind of almost epilogue, which is deliberately ambiguous about what the outcome is. You can read it either way as to whether it's a happy or sad ending for the main character. And we edited those two pages more than the rest of the book put together. Because getting that ending, which is the climax of the book, it's this really difficult, sophisticated thing to pull off. When the author is so close to it, she's like: 'This is so obvious!' And I'm like: 'This is absolutely not obvious! This is obvious to you because you've read it a thousand times.'

Here we see an illustration of the agent's ability to move between different modes of reading; Williams is an attuned reader ('it was worth it, to get it really right'), a critical reader (the 'almost epilogue', 'deliberately ambiguous about what the ending is', 'difficult and sophisticated') and a 'surrogate' first reader ('the author is so close to it', 'this is absolutely not obvious!') Williams was also interesting on the absence of limits in terms of literary endings:

> [A] very beautiful book I've been working on recently: the author sent me a new draft and then the next day he sent me another draft and he was like 'I've changed the last chapter. I just had a thought about how it should actually end. The ending sort of means this; however, I've thought of how it could also mean this, and I don't know which one's better.' It drastically changes the meaning of the book,

> depending on one or the other. […] They both work, that's the thing. We haven't quite decided.

In discussing the ending of *The Miniaturist* there was a suggestion that endings may be deprivileged as a site of intervention since they are rarely one of the features that leads to works of literary fiction being acquired. Here we have Williams revealing the flip side of this dynamic: if there are no particular expectations or demands with regard to endings, this gives the author and agent freedom to navigate a range of possibilities.

Gordon Wise outlined a process more of negotiation than intervention with his authors. He pointed out that once you start making suggestions about specific threads in the narrative it is almost inevitable that the ending will be affected:

> If the ending isn't right I won't be overly disturbed. The next question would be 'Was this the point you were trying to get to?' I'm sure, when an author finishes a book, they say 'That's it! It's all wrapped up!' But sometimes one has to go back and say, you know, 'It was all absolutely fantastic until this happened!' They'd had that endpoint in their mind's eye possibly all the time they were writing and it was probably helping for them to have that endpoint, but it's not always the right endpoint. What's curious is how they [endings] can change. […] If the dynamic shifts during the novel, you know, if one character wasn't getting enough airtime and needs to be expanded – for example I've noticed for some male authors that the women get a bit neglected. [So I might say] 'You've got someone fantastic here and she only inhabits half a chapter. You already need to make all these other things work. Why not draw that thread through and make it all happen?' If you suddenly boost someone like that, it can influence how the ending works. So, yes, endings are truly important but I think have to be open to discussion.

Wise illustrated his approach with an account of his work on Nicolás Obregón's second novel *Sins as Scarlet* (2018): 'He's got a brilliant, brilliant mind but it's certainly been a bit of a chess game about the order in which things happened. They [his drafts] have been 120% ideas and actually the book only needed 100% ideas.' He described detailed conversations with Obregón about the effects of removing particular strands from the narrative and strategies for moving the action on: 'He was brilliant at taking those notes and making that work on his own terms.'

Wise's emphasis on 'drawing a thread' through the narrative to facilitate an ending appeared in other accounts too. Lucy Luck works extensively with short story writers as well as novelists and she started by explaining her approach to short story endings:

> The thing I say more often […] to authors than anything else is 'It doesn't end! You need to make it land!' It's absolutely essential, and it's quite difficult to explain exactly what that means. With landing, it's like you can finish it, and with a sigh, you're not expecting anything else. There's no loose ends. It's not that the characters die, it's not that the door slams. It's that you've got to a point where whatever issue is being explored within that story has come to a natural conclusion and that you are able to leave the characters to go on and do whatever they need to do. They might be dead but, you know that the world that has been created will go on and be the world that has been created. I don't think all of the questions need to be answered. That's not what landing means. What landing means is – it's kind of like a beat, it's in music, it's that beat that finishes a phrase. There's a rhythm to a story.

Her explanation reflects several ideas discussed by novelists in the previous chapter: the fictional 'landing', an analogy with music, the desire for an ending in which tensions are dissolved and the reader takes their leave but maintains their belief in the created world. Luck explained how her approach to landing translates from the short story to the novel:

> It [the novel]'s got more moving parts. There are more overlaps, there are more characters, there's more time. It is a question of being able to complete the narrative arc with all the characters completing it together. I think it's easier to tell the ending of a novel. I think for an author it's easier to say whether they've finished a novel or not.

Nonetheless, Luck found that novel endings were a site of significant intervention for her: 'Endings I do work on, or I do say they're not working when you get to the end. I do talk about structure. I get quite involved, very involved and if it's a practical solution like structure then I will say.' She was adamant that: 'I don't write anything for my authors, I just tell them what they need to rewrite. The validity is in raising the question. The author then has to make that their own, regardless.'

Luck explained that even novels without obvious plots can have a clear narrative arc:

> Every novel that I love, not just that I represent, has a sense of something you want to find out or something you want to live through with the characters, where all of the moving parts play into that. [T]hat one strand, it may not be in focus all the time but it is the thing that pulls you through. [...] There is a narrative force that as a reader keeps you engaged and keeps you returning to the page.

As an illustration she described editing two novels composed of interwoven short stories: *Folk* by Zoe Gilbert (2018), in which each chapter is narrated by a different inhabitant of a mythical island over a generation, and *The Shore* by Sara Taylor (2015), a series of Southern

Gothic narratives linked by a family tree. In each case there were extensive conversations about how much linking between chapters was necessary to hold the reader's attention and about how to bring each book to an ending. In *The Shore*, the ending moves forward in time beyond the scope of the book's wide historical meanderings, while in *Folk* the solution was to emphasize the trajectory of one of the characters and to create a circularity from the beginning to the end of the book.

b. Editors

Alexandra Pringle explained that she can read a novel she is publishing five or six times and that she may work very closely with the author to get it right (although she also made clear that not all novels require this much work). She described the editing process as 'climbing into' the novel and 'responding instinctively to what I find there.' She then invites the author into the office where she says there are lots of 'what if' type conversations. These may involve the ending – as we spoke Pringle was editing a novel by Georgina Harding which she described as 'just about perfect except for the ending, which doesn't quite work'. However, she explained that she found it difficult to isolate her work on endings or indeed to intellectualise the editing process at all: rather she thinks of it as 'a kind of alchemy'. She noted that editors differed considerably on this and that Helen Garnons-Williams (a former colleague) had a much more detailed approach, typically sending authors many pages of notes. Garnons-Williams explained that despite this difference, her ideal strategy is discursive rather than interventionist:

> Authors don't immediately go and do what I say! The best editing that takes place is when I don't give them an answer. […] I'll explain what it is that for me doesn't seem to be working and I might suggest a couple of things but actually the best writers for me are the ones who take that and come up with something that I couldn't come up with.

With regard to endings, she echoed Gordon Wise, commenting that 'if a book needs work it tends to need work in a way that will include the ending in some way, shape or form, because you're pulling threads here and therefore it will have a knock-on effect on what happens at the end'.

Literary Prizes and Modes of Reading

I earlier discussed the effects of the volume of reading undertaken by agents and editors on their evaluations. The question of volume is particularly an issue for prize judges who may be tasked with reading hundreds of books over a period of a few months. John Sutherland talked about wanting people to register that he had done the homework before reaching a decision:

> I was a bit worried because of the famous Selina Scott question, you know: 'Have you read them all?' I gave my notes to Peter Straus,[38] who's got a private collection of Bookerama. I figured I wanted it on record that I had read, at least insofar as it could be called reading sometimes, the hundred and twenty which were submitted. That was 2005! But it's impossible if people are doing day jobs.

His strategy, he explained (partly in jest) was to turn four pages at a time. Another former Booker judge, Alex Clark, has written of the challenge of simply keeping track of what you have read in the run up to judging meetings, noting:

> One of the most useful things a former judge told me ahead of the Booker was to avoid writing things like 'plangent and poignant, very interesting sense of deja-vu in the second half' and instead write: 'Tom is married to Fiona. It happens in Portsmouth. Death on page 351.' (Clark 2018)

This suggests that the discipline of professional reading is in some ways the opposite of the discipline of academic close reading and it is perhaps not surprising if turning tens of thousands of pages, four at a time, casts light on rather different aspects of the novel. For both Baker and Sutherland, narrative structure including endings, and timeliness in terms of how the winning book speaks to the present moment, were included among the aspects that distinguished the winning novel; interestingly considerations of style, voice or character were not singled out by either judge. Baker gave the example to the award of the Bailey's Women's Prize for Fiction in 2017 to Naomi Alderman, arguing that:

> There were books that were better at the level of the sentence than *The Power* but they weren't better at the level of the book. It doesn't matter how beautiful it is at the level of the sentence if it doesn't work at the level of the book in my view. It [*The Power*] does deliver from the beginning to the end.

[38] Literary agent and Managing Director at Rogers, Coleridge and White

Baker cited the last line of *The Power* (2016) as her favourite of any recent novel: 'It is really memorable but also it's absolutely right for the book and it taps in to what lots of people are thinking and talking about.' She was also clear about the importance of the Bailey's as what she called a 'readers' prize', rather than a 'writers' prize':

> I know I personally felt that if we chose a winner that didn't make people want to read the book by the woman we were saying was the best of the year, that we had failed. […] And it is – I think it's the bestselling winner ever and the fastest.

Clearly then, though the problem of volume in reading is radically intensified for prize judges, just as for agents and editors there are negotiations for prize judges in balancing different modes of reading. Prize judges are not 'first readers' but they operate as surrogate 'ordinary' readers, critical readers and attuned readers. The relative priority of each type of reading may depend, to a certain degree, on the identity of the prize. Baker noted:

> I don't think 'If I like it, it's good' but I do tend to think 'Would I happily recommend this to people?' I think it's important to bring a reader's eye. […] It's stated with the Costa but I also think it's important for the Baileys that you've got to want to say to someone 'Oh, read this! Read this!' Even the judge who didn't really like The Power on The Baileys had still said to other people, 'Read it!'

John Sutherland noted that the stated aim of the Booker was to find the best novel of the year and it was widely seen a 'writer's prize.' However, he was sceptical about the Booker's literary and establishment credentials:

> Who is giving the prize? I mean if it was Samuel Johnson, Samuel T. Coleridge, Matthew Arnold and F.R. Leavis – if they were the judges! It would be very nice to think there was some great tribunal [but] in fact the origin was to put more fuel in the engine of the publishing industry. […] It wasn't necessarily cynical because […] the secondary motive was to get people to read books.

As an academic and literary critic, Sutherland's primary mode of engagement with the longlist was as critical reader. He talked in detail about the novelistic strengths of Booker-nominated novels over the years:

> *Saturday*, the Ian McEwan novel I thought was terrific. […] He's such a skilful mechanist in terms of plot.
>
> [of Richard Powers] He's got a quality of seriousness, earnestness which makes him rather chewy.

> *Never Let Me Go* has [a] brilliant ending [...]. You accept what life delivers you, even if it's a life which is synthetic.
>
> I liked the Michael Frayn novel *Headlong*, which seemed to me to be very nicely structured; it had a first reading quality and a second reading quality – in the second reading of course, you know what's going to happen.

It is clear from this last extract that Sutherland was not solely operating as a critical reader, and that he was very conscious of his own different modes of reading. He acknowledged the impossibility of making an absolute qualitative judgement: choosing only one novel in a 'gladiatorial' contest in which there are shortlisted novels by writers such as Kazuo Ishiguro, Ali Smith, John Banville, Zadie Smith, Julian Barnes and Salman Rushdie[39] inevitably means that 'accidental factors come into it'. For Sutherland, those 'accidental features' seem to be connected to his sense of the Booker as a writer's prize:

> How on earth could you say that Ishiguro is better, since we're talking in terms of judgment of absolute quality, than John Banville? To be honest I think *Never Let Me Go* is a superb novel, but, you know, John Banville was 65 years old. [...] I couldn't help thinking about [...] the amount of work, you know! Turning his books out year on year. […] It really was a garret that he was writing in. It's the one moment in my life when I felt I was a determinant. I was changing literary history because by that casting vote I knew that thereafter he would be the novelist who won the Booker, but also he'd be in *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*.

This is not critical reading, but a variant on attuned reading. Sutherland is considering the wider context in which the prize matters, suggesting that John Banville would be valued differently by the literary establishment, and possibly rescued from penury by his Booker triumph with *The Sea* (2005). And while Sutherland is clearly not Banville's 'first reader' it became very clear as he talked about the novel that his judgement was based on an affective as much as a critical response to it – a response perhaps to the book's 'first reading quality':

> It's really a kind of old guy's novel, *The Sea*. This guy Max goes there and discovers his own childhood. The whole thing is a very, very powerful end of life thing [with]that wonderful discovery at the end. He misheard, and the whole of his life has been [shaped by it]. It's not ostentatious because its's buried there in the thing. And the sea goes on and it laps away unaffected.

[39] All on the shortlist in 2005, when Sutherland was the chair of judges

Though Sutherland was no doubt appointed to two Booker panels on the strength of his literary judgement it seems that one of his primary arguments with the Booker establishment is in the pretentiousness of its claim that as a judge one should only read critically, and that commercial judgements, personal affinities and other 'accidental factors' are not, in the end, a factor in any reader's judgement.

Conclusion

What is the relationship between fictional endings and the three modes of reading outlined in this chapter? The interviews suggest that different aspects of endings may be privileged in different readings. For the 'first reader', it is more likely to be at what Sam Baker called 'the level of the book', rather than 'the level of the sentence'. Responses from the literary agents suggest that first reading may call attention to voice and character. Thus, regarding the ending, a central question is whether that voice remains consistent and whether characters have completed their journey. There is also an affective dimension to the first reading, which becomes particularly apparent at the end of the novel: does the book produce an affective or even a visceral response? Does it 'shake' the reader? Does it have 'that real sense of closure of finishing something wonderful for the first time' as Laura Williams puts it? For the critical reader, questions may be more specific and more technical. Critical readers are more likely to be engaged 'at the level of the sentence'. There may be questions about whether the ending 'works' in technical terms, especially for novels with a twist at the end, or a change of gear in their final pages. If you go back through the text from the ending, has the all the evidence that is required been presented? While the first reading draws attention to the reader's affective and visceral responses, it is more likely to be in critical reading mode that the mechanics of producing this effect come in. These may include a discussion of how the novel 'lands' including the musicality of the ending and the importance of pace. Is the ending too rushed, and should the author be advised to take 'just another beat'? As an attuned reader, the agent, editor or critic may pose a different set of questions. Does the novel fulfil its 'contract' with the reader, or does it betray their trust? Is the ending likely to be a factor in the word-of-mouth success of the novel? Is the ending memorable enough to be one of the factors that contributes to the book hitting the fabled 'sweetspot'?

As I have suggested in the chapter, professional literary reading is a complex process, and this typology inevitably oversimplifies it. Agents, publishers and critics may prioritise different elements at different stages, for different novels and in different publishing contexts. Nonetheless I would like to suggest that endings are a privileged site where three types of reading are in play at the same time. The ending can be read as a meeting point, where there is a simultaneous focus on the vision and distinct voice of the author, on 'landing' and the aesthetic qualities that implies, and on the 'compact' between author and reader.

Chapter Six – Endings and Readers: Storytelling and Authenticity at the Book Group

Introduction

In this chapter, the focus shifts from the fields of creation and production to the field of reception. The previous chapter examined the nature of reading within the specialised professional context of the literary agency, publisher or prize jury. Here I open out the discussion to literary fiction audiences and, as outlined in Chapter Three, I was concerned to represent the voices of a wide range of 'ordinary' readers since it is they who govern the public (especially commercial) success or failure of a novel: responding to it, discussing it, convincing others to read it and perhaps going on to buy the author's next book. But what are the criteria of evaluation in terms of which the book-buying public, engage the contemporary novel? The readers examined in this chapter are members of book groups around the UK and beyond and this chapter aims to elucidate the features of reading group critique.[40]

In my interview with John Sutherland he suggested that three things had energised literature in the seventy years he had been reading: the internet, the rise of the literary festival and reading groups. He explained

> All over the country, there are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of little Booker juries. It's hugely energizing. I go to them and the one thing you must never do is put on the professor. […] It seems to me that what's interesting about the reading groups I've been to […] in America and in Britain is that quite often people go with a consensus and that fractures during the discussion and what you end up with is people disagreeing with each other in a very civil way. […] And that's very interesting because what people are doing is making their own minds up.

Sutherland's experience of reading groups tallies with Hartley's research (2001). She notes that 'reading groups are about reading in the community rather than the academy. Indeed, being non-academic may be part of their self-definition.'(2001:138). It should be stressed however, that 'being non-academic' does not necessarily mean that groups do not include academics or students among their members – several of the groups who responded to me did and indeed several included people who work in publishing. But, as Sutherland argued and my experience as a participant-observer demonstrated, most reading groups will not tolerate any 'putting on of the professor', just as they do not stand on ceremony for

[40] Majumdar and Vadde (2019) see reading groups as an example of 'the critic as amateur'.

illustrious literary authors or pretend to admire anything they think they should admire. Studying the responses of reading groups gives a wholly different perspective from the empirical experiments of Fish or Bleich whose case studies are of groups of their own students, already academic literary critics in training. If reading groups are 'non-academic' in character, their perspectives are not necessarily more aligned with the literary industry perspectives examined in the previous chapter. As we saw in Hartley's research they 'breathe at a healthy distance from the professional world of writing and reviewing'. (2001:156)

Book group members are not 'ideal' readers, they may or may not be 'informed' readers, but they are certainly 'interpretive communities'. Hartley argues that 'a reading group isn't just about reading; it's about reading in a context, a context which is fostered by the group, and which in turn affects the whole experience of reading.' (2001:22). This chapter's primary interest is in assessing the interest in and effects of endings on 'ordinary' readers but along the way it raises questions about whether 'reading group reading' is distinctive from purely 'individual reading' and how the context of the reading group may have an effect on what is read, how it is read and how it is judged.

Context

In order to give some sociological context to the responses that follow, the questionnaire included questions about the profile of group members and the history of their group. With a relatively small number of respondents (forty-one compared to the 350 surveyed for Hartley's study) this is in no way intended to be an analysis of the sociological profile of reading groups in general, but it forms useful background to the thesis and is included as Appendix 6.

What are the groups reading? Of the forty-one groups, seven read exclusively recent literary fiction, thirteen read 'a mixture' while eighteen groups recorded reading literary fiction and other genres. The survey asked respondents to list books the group had read recently and the table below records those listed by three or more groups.

Title	Author	Number of groups
Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine	Gail Honeyman	12
Burial Rites	Hannah Kent	5
Home Fire	Kamila Shamsie	5
Little Fires Everywhere	Celeste Ng	4
The Miniaturist	Jessie Burton	4
Conversations with Friends	Sally Rooney	3
The Power	Naomi Alderman	3
All the Light We Cannot See	Anthony Doerr	3
A Fine Balance	Rohinton Mistry	3
The Kite Runner	Khaled Hosseini	3

Table 1: What are the Groups Reading?

Individual Reading and Collective Discussion

Reading is always an individual pursuit, but reading for discussion at a group meeting is characterised by some external constraints. A collective dimension enters into reading, even before participants gather at a meeting. They may be reading a book they would not have otherwise chosen to read, they are reading it to a deadline and they are reading to discuss the book with others. The questionnaire asked respondents to explain the typical starting point for group discussion. I was interested in establishing whether particular aspects of the novel offer a good 'way in' to the transition from individual reading to group discussion. Some groups reported a structured approach in which someone does a fifteen-minute introduction or for which Reading Group guide questions were sourced from the internet. It was more common however for groups to dive straight into members' individual judgements, preferences and feelings about the chosen book and to explore the personal factors that led to the selection. A group in Winchester was more pragmatic:

> Usually we start by asking 'has anyone actually read the book?

This last question points to a possible limitation of my methodology, which is the fact that in most book groups there are at least some participants who may have read some of the novel but haven't yet got to the end. Groups have different ways of responding to members who have not yet finished the novel. Some groups explicitly don't talk about the ending, others are more hard line, offering no concessions to those who have not

completed their reading. A group in Dummer, Hampshire pointed out that 'often if a member really dislikes a book, they won't have got to the end of it, so don't know what the ending is'. Books that participants are finding difficult are also less likely to be read to the end. The expectation that members may struggle with some books is often acknowledged in the *modus operandi* of the group:

> We have a rule that if by 50 pages the book hasn't yet grabbed your interest, you are allowed to drop it.
> (Firstcomers group, Bampton)

There was little evidence in the responses that disliking a book, or not finishing it made members less likely to come to the meeting. At the North Hants No 1 Book Club, which I attended as an observer, members described Marlon James' *A Short History of Seven Killings* (2014) as 'convoluted, unpleasant, difficult to understand'. One member boasted 'Look at my halo! I think I was the only person who finished it!', yet they talked about the book in detail and had clearly relished their dissection of it. While some groups try to choose books that most members would enjoy, others relish difficult and divisive books. At a typical meeting for a Sydney group: 'We generally all disagree and enjoy the argument'.

Time pressure may have different effects on perceptions of the ending if readers are enjoying the book. At the North Hants No.1 Book Club, the designated book was the 500 page *The Mermaid and Mrs Hancock* (Gowar 2018). One member reported 'I realised before I'd finished it they were going to get rid of the mermaid. So I had to finish it! I realised that and skipped to it – 6 o' clock this morning!' Skipping ahead may lead to members 'missing' elements of the narrative that a slower reading may have clarified. The reader who raced to the end had not noticed the parallels that others discussed between the captured mermaid and the former prostitute, Mrs Hancock. A member of the Waterstones group in Winchester confessed of Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2018)
'I enjoyed the book but I was very confused about where the ending was. The narrative hops forward and I think I might have missed one of the hops!'

Textual Features and Collective Critique

The questionnaire asked about the main issues of discussion during the book group meeting. I provided a list of possible topics, of which individual respondents could tick as many as applied and they were also invited to add areas of discussion not on the list.

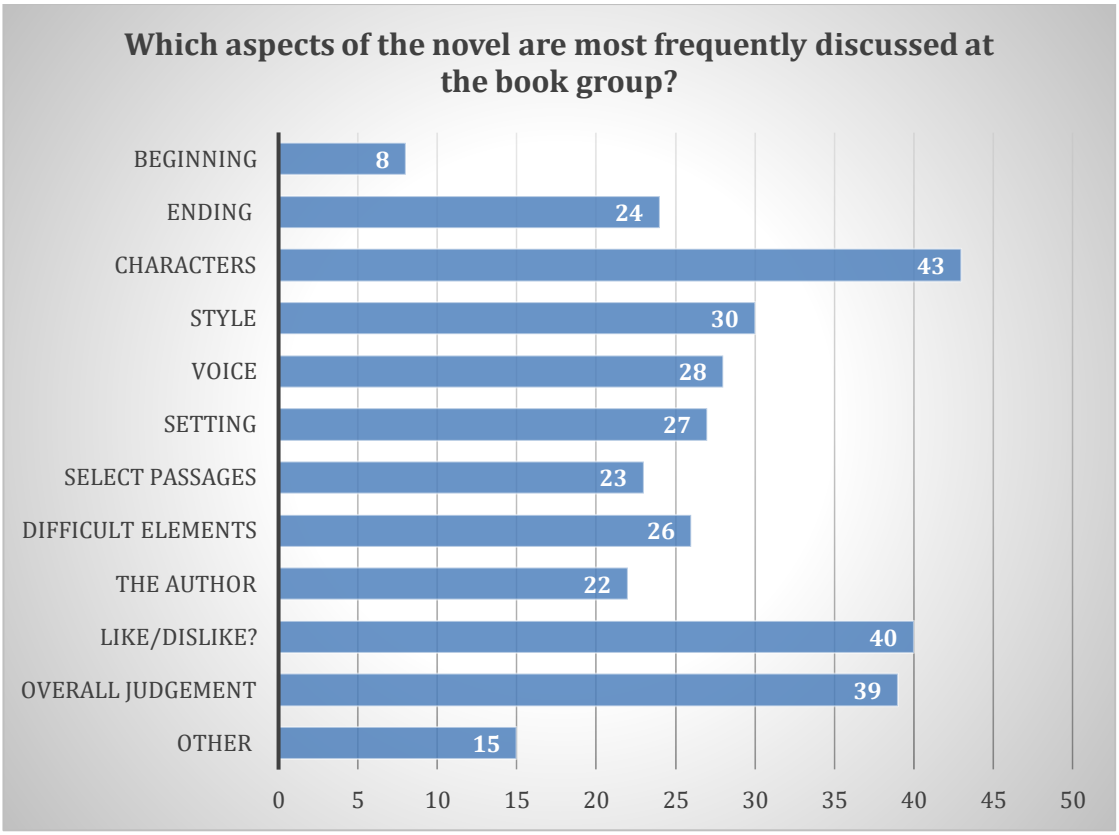

Figure 1: Which Aspects are Discussed?

The only element discussed by all the groups without exception was character. Style was also widely discussed and voice and setting were discussed by a majority of groups. Twenty-four of forty-three respondents (56%) reported that their group frequently discussed endings. It is notable that this figure is so much higher than those who discussed beginnings (eight of forty-three) especially given the concentration on the beginning of the novel by so many respondents in the literary industry interviews. It may be that some striking elements of novel openings, for example, narrative voice or setting, are covered under other categories. It is perhaps not surprising (given that so many groups opened with this question) that almost all the groups discussed whether they personally liked or disliked the novel and it was significant that almost as many offered an overall judgement on whether they thought the novel was good or well written, reinforcing John Sutherland's idea of reading groups as 'little Booker juries'. 'Other' aspects listed by respondents included some that might be prominent in critical, academic readings. A couple of groups stated that they seek to draw out the underlying themes of the novel. A group in Manchester, with a membership comprising editors, gallery owners and musicians, discuss 'narrative conceits, metaphors, metafictional instances and translations'. Several groups mentioned that they discussed the connection of the novel to readers' own lives: a group in

Winchester enjoyed books that were about 'getting below the surface of people and then we relate this to ourselves' and the Waterstones group discussed 'the overall effect of the book in terms of its impact on us, our understanding of the theme, history, philosophy, etc.'. Groups also discussed the technical accuracy of the novel (something that came up elsewhere in the survey, particularly with regard to the veracity of historical novels). Cover design and film and television adaptations were also discussed by a handful of groups.

The first book club I visited for the research was a large branch of Waterstones for a discussion of Kamila Shamsie's *Home Fire* (2017). The discussion opened with a focus on the 'believability' of the central characters, the group particularly admiring the portrayals of the radicalisation of the vulnerable Parvaiz and the Machiavellianism of the Home Secretary Karamat Lone. However, much more discussed than character at this meeting were questions of form, structure and pace. This may well have been specific to the book, which is a contemporary retelling of Antigone. The group debated the explosion of retellings from classical sources in recent years, including Madeline Miller's *Circe* (2018). Of *Home Fire*'s classical origins one member said:

> It gives a very contemporary story, a global story, set in a digital world infused with contemporary concerns about radicalisation, surveillance and hard-line politicians, a timeless quality.

Some participants felt this timeless quality would allow the book to achieve classic status and to be read in fifty years' time; others disputed this given the very contemporary nature of the issues. There was also discussion of the organization of the novel into five sections giving each protagonist's perspective separately, starting with Isma and Eamonn, who were felt to be the most easily identifiable characters, and only then depicting the perspectives of the more 'difficult' characters. The ending was a significant focus of the group's discussion. Readers felt that the move towards the climax was 'well-handled', noting the author's skill in 'inducing the reader to read faster and faster to see what happened', even though, for those who knew Antigone, the ending was inevitable. Interestingly, it seemed that the book was liked equally by those familiar with the story of Antigone and by those who were not. Most members agreed that the ending was satisfying in being true to its source material and believable in its depiction of a contemporary family buffeted by competing political ideologies.

Defining Endings

It became clear during discussions of *Home Fire* that some members understood ending to mean the final tragic scene on the lawn of the British Embassy in Karachi; others had an extended sense of the term, incorporating the move towards the climax following Parvaiz's assassination and Aneeka's arrival in Karachi, in fact the whole of the final two chapters in which the narrative voice shifts to that of the Home Secretary. During the focus group meetings that followed, I asked group members about their understanding of what an ending is. The Bampton Firstcomers group offered a range of definitions:

- the last chapter
- the end of the story
- the end for the characters
- bringing the book back full circle
- the furthest point forward chronologically

I found this last particularly interesting given that the group had been reading Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* (2013) in which the final chapter returns to a new perspective on an event that took place forty years previously, revealing a hidden psychological element of the central relationships of the book. However, this is preceded, over several drawn-out chapters, by the last chronological events for each character. We could see this book therefore as offering two different endings to readers: the first valued by those who seek to understand the end for the characters or the chronological narrative; the second valued by those who seek an ending that brings the book back full circle.

The V & A book group confined their definition of endings to the novel under discussion at the meeting: Sally Rooney's *Conversations with Friends* (2017):

Caroline Wintersgill	Can I just ask for some clarification? When you're talking about endings, which bit precisely are you all meaning?
Reader 1	I am meaning the moment when she's shopping, she's in the bookshop and Nick rings. Like, the last chapter.
Reader 2	Yes, the phone call onwards.

Reader 3 Rather than the resolution, I suppose, of everyone. I'm just thinking of those two.

These readers seem to be suggesting that what makes an ending is the resolution of the story for the central characters. What is interesting in this book though is that there is, in fact, very little resolution. Two of the central characters allow themselves, rather by accident, to slide back into a relationship. Group members were unanimous in their view that it was not likely to last. The final lines of the conversation are preceded by an interior monologue from Frances, underscoring the provisional nature of her decision. The group acknowledged that this monologue could be read as a small shift in tone that marks an ending:

Reader 1 It sounds that she's acknowledging that she probably won't understand her and Nick's relationship till years in the future maybe. Like she can't analyse it because she's still in it.

Reader 2 Acknowledging that kind of immaturity again, yes.

However, one group member raised a different perspective suggesting that since it was voice, rather than character that made *Conversations with Friends* distinctive, what seemed to be an ending for this novel, was not in fact an ending for the reader:

Reader 1 I think also when I was reading this, because I knew there was a second novel it didn't feel like the end.

Caroline Wintersgill Has the second novel got any of the same characters?

Reader 1 No. But because I really liked the writer, on a level of female voice, I was like 'It's not the end! I'm going to carry on!' So I was like 'This is great. This is something that isn't at an end. I can actually carry on reading her voice.'

Most of the group members were swept up by the novel – one mentioned that 'I turned down social interactions with people so I could finish it. I read it in like a day I think.' But unusually for such an absorbing read, the characters were unanimously considered irritating and none of the group members seemed to feel any emotion at taking their leave of them at the end of the book:

> I just felt a bit, maybe . . . Oh no! it's another bad decision!

The group related their experience of reading *Conversations with Friends* to watching the first series of Phoebe Waller Bridge's television series *Fleabag*. They suggested that both writers are 'so speaking of a generation and of an age group' that Rooney's follow-up novel *Normal People* can be read as, effectively a 'series two', after which 'like Phoebe Waller Bridge […] she'll quit while she's ahead because she's smart.'

At the North Hants No.1 Book Club one member was able to quote the last lines of several of her favourite novels, but she noted 'there's two different things. I've been able to quote two and remember the actual words; that's different to remembering what happened, how it ended'. The group concurred that 'ending' and 'final line' are not usually synonymous, though there was some argument about which was the most memorable:

Reader 1 The outcome! the outcome! As opposed to final words.

Reader 2 I think it's the wrap up. That's how you remember a book, you don't remember the last line.

Despite this claim, many in the group admitted they found it extremely difficult to remember the 'wrap up' of literary novels, especially those they had liked. One of the group members explained:

> Where it's satisfying and it's right and it's a good book, it's like a full stop, isn't it on the end of a good book. You don't therefore particularly remember.

This suggests that the best endings for some readers may be those that do not draw attention to themselves, that are quietly appropriate and seen as authentic to the novel, a point to which I will return.

The Role of Endings in Group Discussion

Some groups clearly particularly enjoy discussing endings:

> The ending is almost always discussed and is quite a prominent feature (Winchester group)

> Appropriateness of endings is often discussed – joy, surprise or disappointment in the ending too.

(Ropley/Bighton group)

The two parts of this response are interesting: the 'appropriateness' of an ending may be a critical judgement – is the ending in keeping with the tone of the novel? Yet, for this group, the ending also seems to be a particular locus of readers' affective response to the novel, triggering joy, surprise or disappointment, and a vehicle for discussing these individual responses within the group setting. A sense of the heightened emotion engendered by a powerful ending was also apparent in one of the responses from the Waterstones focus group of his visceral response to *A Shout in the Ruins* (Powers 2018):

> A story with parallel narratives across a historical divide. The ending of this book made the hairs at the back of my head stand up!

A member of the Topsham group concurred on the need for an 'appropriate' ending but suggested that the main responsibility of the ending was not to disrupt the reading experience:

> I admire a book that holds my attention. I just love reading. As far as an ending goes, as long as it conforms to the rest of the book (i.e. the logic and flow is there) then I have no expectations. To me, I love a book where I realise an hour has passed when it seems like five minutes. And with some books I don't want to get to the end as it is so good.

Other groups offered a qualified response to the question:

> It's important to the group but it's not the be all and end all of discussion
> (Mulberry Book Group, Kempston, Bedfordshire)

> [The ending has] some role but it depends on the book. A brilliant, or unsatisfactory ending will be discussed.
> (North London group)

> [Endings are] not hugely prominent but we have certainly had discussions when we've deemed an ending disappointing or satisfactory, which adds to the appreciation of the novel as a whole.
> (V & A group)

Several of these responses indicate that 'good' endings, and especially good 'quiet' endings may not generate much discussion because of those very features: they are 'appropriate' and in keeping with the rest of the book. On the other hand, what is seen as a 'bad', 'inauthentic' or 'disappointing' ending may generate much more discussion in virtue of those features as may ambiguous endings that readers feel they have not fully understood:

> Endings will play a more prominent role if people were disappointed with them [or] didn't understand them.
> (Manchester group of university administrators)

A Winchester pub group noted that they had read *The Underground Railroad* (Whitehead 2016) without some of them realising it had fantastic elements, so the group spent significant time during their meeting going back through incidents in the novel to gain better understanding.

Endings and Group Judgement

The questionnaire asked respondents to list books that the group had particularly liked and disliked and books that had divided the group, and then to indicate whether the endings were a factor in these judgements.

19 groups felt that the ending had been an important (12) or discernible (7) factor in their positive appraisal of a recent book or books
12 groups felt that the ending had been an important (5) or discernible (7) factor in their negative appraisal of a recent book or books
7 groups felt the ending had been an important (3) or discernible (4) factor for a book that divided the group.

Figure 2: How Do Endings Affect Overall Judgement?

Some groups felt strongly that the ending could make or break a book:

> [The ending] tends to colour the opinion of the whole book.
> (Winchester pub group)

> If it's a really good ending or a twist this is thought favourable by the group, despite the rest of the book being mediocre. If the ending is bad and the book was good up to that point this also plays a part.
> (Good Reads in Leeds)

Others saw endings as one contributory factor to a book's overall success.

> A sound resolution will generally contribute to people's enjoyment.
> (Manchester group of university administrators)

> The strong and satisfying ending to *Mary Reilly*[41] definitely contributed to the group liking it.
> (Southampton workplace group)

> Usually a satisfactory ending is the icing on the cake
> (Topsham Group)

> A few recent liked books the ending was relevant as it either rounded off a character's journey, or got to the crux of the point of the book.
> (Good Reads in Leeds)

Some of those books listed as favourites were subject to lively, and sometimes critical debate over endings. The Topsham Group recorded that all of the books they read had divided the group because their members are 'different in upbringing, beliefs and understanding our truths, so our preconceived ideas are so different.' They listed *The White Boy Shuffle* (Beatty 1996) as the book that came closest to one everyone enjoyed. Interesting however the group did not like the ending, but this did not affect their overall judgement: 'It was unusual, some of it was incomprehensible but we found that none of us had minded this as we were swept along with the story and the writing.' Similarly, during the focus group at Waterstones in Winchester, the group described *A Gentleman in Moscow* (Towles 2016) as their favourite book of the last year but did not perceive the ending as one of its strengths. They felt that it was entirely possible to love a book without being convinced by the ending, commenting that, in a very strong book you 'take ownership' of a narrative as you are reading it and can imagine your own endings.

Conversely, the Southampton group talked of 'the burden on the ending to give a sense of satisfaction and reward to the effort that has been put into reading the book', noting as an example *Little Fires Everywhere* (Ng 2017):

> There is closure, loose ends are tied up and there is a sense that in the end the right kind of truth came out and fairness prevailed, even if it was destructive for some involved.

This particular book was liked by all four groups who read it: a group in Manchester praised the 'very readable story, a page-turner, with a big cast of varied characters, some challenging and thought-provoking ideas to do with immigration, adoption, art and

[41] Martin (1990): a parallel novel to Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*

photography, mental health, surrogacy.' Interestingly though, the ending was not universally admired. For the V & A group 'the ending was a bit too neat and we had a lot of questions as to the consequences.'

Sometimes however, and especially with more literary novels, there seemed to be a kind of aspiration of invisibility for the ending. A long-established North London group, listed *Plainsong* (Haruf 1999) as their number one book:

> A book with heart, beautifully written, simple spare style, fantastic evocation of the place. […] I wouldn't rate [the ending] as very high in our evaluations, compared with other elements.

This group noted that endings were discussed mainly when they were either 'brilliant or unsatisfactory'. Several groups drew attention to 'quiet' novels with an 'appropriate' ending that had not become much of an issue for discussion. The Ropley and Bighton Group selected *The Painter of Silence* (Harding 2012):

> Beautiful imagery, character drawing, portrayal of war . . . so much! All liked the ending: the major decisions made by both main characters are implied not narrated. It highlights their emerging independence, undramatic, but emphasising their resilience, a theme throughout the book.

For the Winchester U3A group*, A Month in the Country* (Carr 1980) had the same effect, while a respondent from a Manchester group made a similar observation:

> I've just read *The Mars Room* [Kushner 2018], *Washington Black* [Edugyan 2018] and *Paris Echo* [Faulks 2018] – the endings of all three were relatively inconsequential, didn't 'wrap up' the story or the characters' projected futures, or explain everything that had gone before, and yet I loved all three of the books. The ending wasn't particularly influential in my overall feelings about the books – they were about experiencing a 'slice of life' from very diverse historical periods or geographic locations, and not about the 'resolution' to a narrative.

With regard to novels that groups disliked, most did not regard endings as hugely relevant to their negative judgement.

> Feeling negative about a book starts a long time before the ending. The ending is often the least of it and often we don't even finish the book or are just glad to get to the end.
> (Winchester group of 50–60 somethings)

> *Nora Webster* [Toíbín 2014]: it didn't make much difference in the end because the negative view of the book was about plot and character and other points in the book rather than the ending.
> (Good Reads in Leeds)

> *The Kite Runner* [Hosseini 2003]: the characters were not felt to be particularly well-drawn, some of the cultural descriptions were found to make members uncomfortable. [...] The ending felt a relief to a difficult novel.
> (Laing Street Ladies' Book Group, Kirkwall, Orkney)

It is unsurprising that that readers are more likely to abandon a book that they dislike before the end, but it is interesting that relatively few respondents thought that the ending was especially relevant when books divided the group. A group in Stockport suggested: 'Often when it's divided, the haters have abandoned it before the end' – thus it may be simply impossible to tell whether the ending would have been a source of further division. The North London group reported that endings were 'not usually' a reason for divisions within the group, noting:

> [It is] much more about the whole nature of the text – tricksy or clever, or complex in its construction, or full of fascinating dilemmas or plotlines, or a moving touching, realistic portrayal of a relationship, etc.

The Kirkwall group mentioned *Possession* (Byatt 1990) as a book which divided the group, though they were not divided over the ending:

> Some felt it was overlong and densely written. Others appreciated the academic storyline and research that clearly made the book the modern classic that it has become. […] All felt the ending was predictable yet not really satisfying.

In a long novel such as *Possession*[42] there is perhaps a particular sense of the 'burden on the ending' to fulfil a responsibility to the reader for having read so far, which in this case seems to have been unsatisfied.

Among groups that did mention the endings of particular novels as divisive was the Sydney group who noted:

> The author Tim Winton has divided the group. Some love and hate his writing. *Outlander* [1991] was described as tosh and a waste of valuable reading time by some and adored by others.
>
> [Of the ending]: [Some] people felt it was unbelievable – others loved it.

[42] 624 pages in the Vintage paperback edition.

Such concerns over the 'believability' of endings were widely reported:

> Group not convinced by ending of *The Paying Guests* [Waters 2014]. So much evidence against her but she got off.
> (U3A group, Winchester)

> The ending should be satisfactory in some way, and in keeping with the story and realistic, i.e. not suddenly tying up loose ends as in the end of *The Kite Runner* which we felt was great until the end.
> (Winchester 50–60 somethings group)

The novel most widely read by the groups in my study was *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* (Honeyman 2017). A Birmingham group described noted the 'lovely character' and 'unpredictable story without cliché'. For the North Hants No. 1 book club, the book's ending was (for them) unusually memorable. They described it as 'just tragic; really, really sad', commenting of the ending 'it sorted out quite nicely didn't it?' For one of the pub groups in Winchester it was the recent book they had most enjoyed because it 'tackled loneliness and social rejection in a brave, original and upfront way', although they felt that 'the ending was a slight let-down to the story.' The ending of this novel attracted a much more passionate response from some of the literary industry interviewees cited in the last chapter, with Laura Williams admitting 'the ending made me want to throw it across the room'. I found a similar anomaly in assessing the responses of reading groups to two other novels with endings that literary industry respondents had found very controversial. Helen Garnons-Williams' passionate response to *A God in Ruins* was not reflected in the judgement of the Bampton Firstcomers Group, who commented: '*A God in Ruins s*uccessfully alters incidents from the earlier book *Life after Life*. Both are well-written and carry you along so anomalies do not worry the reader.' Likewise, Garnons-Williams' view of the 'terrible ending' of *The Miniaturist* did not seem to be shared by any of the three groups that read it. Most groups seem to have been absorbed by what the North Hants No. 1 Book Group noted as the 'beautiful prose [which] dropped the reader into another time, well-crafted and excellent characterisations'. The North Hants No. 1 group discussion about this book is worth quoting as it is revealing of both the dynamic of the group and what they prioritise in their reading:

Reader 1 She [Jessie Burton] wrote *The Miniaturist* because she went with her boyfriend to the Rijksmuseum and saw the doll's house. Everyone thought it was such a wonderful invention, but she said 'it was just there in front of me, so I used it in my book.

Reader 2 It was quite macabre wasn't it? All these little tiny things would appear just as things were happening to her.

Reader 3 There were quite a few unanswered questions though.

Reader 4 Oh, I loved that book!

Reader 2 It was quite creepy!

Reader 5 Do you like clowns**?**

Reader 2 Clowns? No, I hate clowns! Is that the same thing as dolls' houses? But *The Minaturist* had that same sort of air of mystery about it, didn't it?

Reader 3 It was a bit irritating.

Reader 5 But again I loved the social history of that one.

Reader 1 So when they put it on television *The Miniaturist* was slightly different, wasn't it? You saw on television who was delivering the parcels – because we never knew.

Reader 2 Yes, and the mystical element was flattened out a bit.

Reader 5 Oh, and the husband was definitely gay, wasn't he? [. . .] and she found them in the warehouse.

This dialogue reveals several interesting aspects of the group dynamic. First, that the group paid particular attention to well-researched detail in the historical novels they read. The book under discussion in the session I attended was *The Mermaid and Mrs Hancock*, set-in eighteenth-century London, which features the exhibition of what purports to be the corpse of a genuine mermaid. Reader 1 explained: 'I was looking through some magazines yesterday and it just fell open: there was a mermaid that had just been auctioned! It was hideous and I guess it was a bit like this. […] It had a really long fish's tail […] and it had a monkey's head. But they joined them so well and put scales over it and everything that everyone believed! The Victorians actually believed. It looked quite hideous actually.' There was the sense that the group sought a narrative that felt authentic and believable, even where it had magic realist elements. Second, that book discussions are polyvocal – indeed they are full of friendly banter: group members talk over each other all the time (so much so, indeed, that the group member who is trying to make a point about the unsatisfactory ending is drowned). Third, the book is compared to its television adaptation, something this group did regularly. They explained:

Reader 5 We quite like it when we can watch the film. We're usually disappointed by the film.

Reader 4 They're all too soppy!

Reader 5 They do all tie up very neatly.

It is notable that the group is much more tolerant of the ambiguity and unanswered questions of the literary novel, than the over-neat endings that are sometimes imposed in film adaptations.[43]

Ending Preferences

The questionnaire sought to assess how different narrative strategies were received by groups. It offered a range of ending types and respondents were directed to select as many as applied.

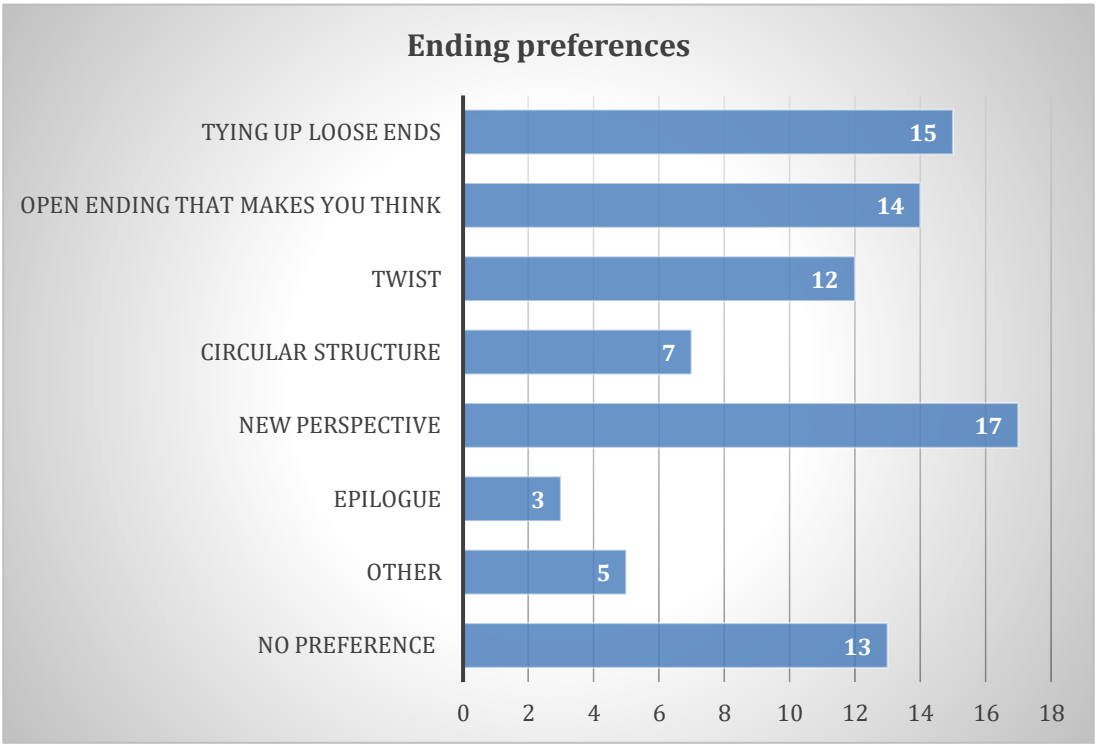

Figure 3: What Kind of Endings Do Reading Groups Value?

[43] In the case of *The Miniaturist*, the producer explained in an interview that she felt the invisibility of the title character in the novel was 'a slight oversight. [...] We felt that wasn't right for this story and we didn't want our audience to feel cheated.' (Hallemann 2018).

There was some overlap between categories, as one of the respondents pointed out:

> I like the loose ends tied up, which often includes a circular structure. I also like a twist, which is often a new perspective.
> (Winchester group with members from 25 to 45)

Of the groups selecting the 'other' category, two respondents mentioned novels in which the ending sets the ground for a sequel (the Dummer group liked this, the Sydney group did not). The Bampton Firstcomers' group pointed to the appeal of an ending which offers 'some sense of hope' at the end of a bleak narrative, citing the optimistic ending of Anna Hope's novel *Wake* (2014), set in the broken aftermath of the First World War. The 'creative' group in Manchester, which included several musicians, raised the idea that the ending might be analogous to the Coda in music.

> I particularly loved the ending of *The Vegetarian* [Han Kang 2007], *Diary of a Mad Old Man* [Tanizaki 1961], *Mirror, Shoulder, Signal* [Nors 2015] – all different sorts of codas, all suiting the narrative strategies of the novels.

In *The Harvard Dictionary of Music* (Randel 2003) a coda is defined as 'any concluding passage that can be understood as occurring after the structural conclusion of a work and that serves as a formal closing gesture'. The entry continues: 'composers before Beethoven generally employed codas to increase the sense of musical finality or symmetry. [. . .] Beethoven used codas most notably to delay or interrupt a final resolution, often with highly dramatic effect.' This analogy gives a range of possible narrative strategies, but it also suggests a particular attention to the rhythmic and tonal qualities of endings, whether tending to resolution or to the withholding of resolution. The Manchester group were the only reading group to raise the analogy between musical and narrative endings, but it is a significant parallel in that it also appears regularly in the accounts of authors, editors and agents.

Several groups chose not to select preferences, some noting that the answer would always depend on the specific narrative requirements of the novel:

> I think we keep a collective open mind about endings.
> (Downton group, Wiltshire)

> Impossible to generalise. Every novel demands something different to make an ending successful/satisfying.
> (Laing Street Ladies' Book Group, Kirkwall, Orkney)
>
> I think endings are satisfying for all the above reasons. I think sometimes we need to know what happened, or to think about what might have happened.
> (Topsham group, Devon)

There was clearly also considerable division within groups. There were comments such as 'one of our number really does want a happy ending each time' and 'some of us like it to be believable'. Of all the questions asked, this was the most likely to be answered from the perspective of one individual respondent. The breadth of response within groups was clear when I conducted a focus group at a large drop-in Waterstones reading group:

> I especially like endings that leave you wanting to think, to mull things over
>
> I like everything to be tied up
>
> An ending you can believe in
>
> An ending that reveals the purpose of the book[44]
>
> In my twenties when my brain worked properly I was ambitious in my reading and very comfortable with open endings. Now life is so busy I need more resolution.

The suggestion that readers may have different preferences and expectations at different stages of life is evident elsewhere in the research. For example, among the groups comprising older members there was a widespread dislike of stories that were particularly bleak or depressing. This did not appear to be so widely felt among younger groups: a respondent in Leeds who belonged to three book clubs with members of an average age of thirty, argued that 'people generally like books even if the book doesn't end well for the main character.' This supports a further observation of Sutherland's regarding his participation in reading groups: 'It goes back to the fact that we read the same novels differently. And we read the same novels differently during the course of our own lifetimes. And we read the same novels differently according to where we are. On holiday. you read novels very differently from when you read it when you're going to bed at night after an exhausting day at the office.'

[44] This respondent cited Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937), describing the ending, in which George shoots Lennie, as 'telling us something important about society. It was clear that Steinbeck had written it for a reason.'

In terms of what they didn't like, the Waterstones group was also divided, but several members noted that that they particularly disliked narratives that 'run out of steam' and 'endings that are too neat'. Judgements about when a 'tied up' ending is 'too neat' are inevitably controversial. Quite a large number of groups selected 'tying up loose ends' among their ending preferences, and some groups gave particular examples of this working effectively, such as the Southampton group's praise for *Little Fires Everywhere*. However, several groups noted particular novels where 'contrived' or 'unrealistic' endings had let down an otherwise strong novel:

> *The Help* [Stockett 2009]: The author was too much into explaining everything. I was irritated by the need to tie up the ending; it felt patronising.
> (Waterstones group, Winchester)

> I don't think we like a particular type of ending, but the ending should be satisfactory in some way and in keeping with the story and realistic, i.e. not suddenly tying up loose ends as in the end of *The Kite Runner* which we felt was great until the end.
> (Winchester group of 50–60 somethings)

> We do not enjoy it when all is sorted out by the end – unrealistic. [...] Probably open endings are preferred in fiction.
> (Condicote group)

> *The Maid's Room* [Mitchell 2017]: A gritty subject but the ending dumbed it down. They all lived happily ever after and this felt inauthentic and contrived.
> (Waterstones group, Winchester)

The Bampton Firstcomers' Group wrote 'Sometimes it was satisfying to have some ends tied up but often it was not considered necessary.' One group considered that an epilogue might be a way to tie up some loose endings but still give a sense of a story that is continuing:

> I like books that have an epilogue taking the story further as very often I do not want a book to end. An epilogue can help with tying up some or all 'loose ends' and can also make you think.
> (Kindle Spirit Girls' Group)

It should be noted that this was also a divisive opinion. One of the Winchester groups wrote 'Epilogues are a cop-out!' However, the Kindle Spirit group's desire for a book 'not to end' and to 'make you think' was shared by many groups. For some in the Waterstones group this was one of the attractions of the ambiguous ending: 'one where the reader can project their own [ending].' Other groups concurred:

> I personally like endings that make you think about what happened next.
> (ALAS, Melbourne)

> I enjoy a 'not all ends tied up' ending, so for example after *Excellent Women* [1952] by Barbara Pym I continue to wonder if Mildred married Everard Bone as a 'full life' might indicate.[45]
> (Bampton Firstcomers' group)

Relatively open endings may also work particularly well in the context of a group. The Ropley/Bighton group noted that: 'Unresolved or 'status quo' endings often prompt better discussion.'

Seventeen groups noted that they valued endings that provided a new perspective on the story, while twelve enjoyed a narrative twist, a feature considered particularly conducive to reading group discussion:

> We LOVE a good plot twist, even if the book is just okay, a plot twist always gets people talking about the book more.
> (Good Reads in Leeds)

A group in Winchester wrote that they tended to 'feel cheated by unreliable narrators', while one of the Manchester groups noted that they felt most let down by 'an ending where the book/characters don't seem to have progressed/developed/'gone' anywhere'. At the North Hants No. 1 group the focus was also on unsuccessful endings:

Reader a: We've been cross in the past about books that haven't finished satisfactorily.

Reader b: Books that just peter out – that's the worst! You think 'Oh, bollocks to you!'

Reader c: You notice that much more in films though, don't you?

Reader d: And when things don't tie up, I find that very frustrating.

Reader b: And you feel cheated.

[45] She does. Pym does tie up this particular ending two novels later in *Less than Angels* (1955).

I was interested in the word 'cheated' and asked whether the group felt that the author had a responsibility to the reader:

Reader b: That's an interesting thought. Yes!

Reader c: Not to leave them in suspense, not knowing what's happening.

Reader d: To write something that we understand!

As an example of an 'unsatisfactory' narrative some in the group cited *A Brief History of Seven Killings* (James 2014), arguing that 'he landed you in the middle of things where you had no idea where you were in the story', that it had been difficult to navigate the 'convoluted', disparate threads of the narrative, and that the story was, in any case, 'unpleasant'. It seemed from the group's discussion that their feeling that the novel was 'unpleasant' was ultimately most relevant to the group's judgement. This was not a group that was afraid of getting to grips with complex, ambiguous, difficult narratives or unfamiliar settings: they had read and admired Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*, Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, Ali Smith's *The Accidental* and Stefan Zweig's *Beware of Pity*.

In my interview with Helen Garnons-Williams at Fourth Estate, she talked of the skill of authors working with narratives heading to an inevitable and often tragic end, including Mantel's Cromwell trilogy and Hannah Kent's *Burial Rites* (2013) of which Garnons-Williams commented:

> When you're told it's the story of the last woman to be beheaded in Iceland, from the very beginning, you think 'How are you going to make that work?'. But it's the coming at it from different angles I think. […] It's a real skill to do that when you know that you're going from A to B, but it's the journey that's extraordinary.

Burial Rites was read by five of the groups surveyed, including the North Hants No. 1 group:

Reader b: We were talking about *Burial Rites*, wanting it to have a happy ending but of course all the way through the book you know the ending, because they're the last woman to be hanged.

Caroline Wintersgill: Was it a satisfying ending?

Reader b: Yes! Yes!

Caroline Wintersgill: So it doesn't need to be happy to be good?

Reader c: No. A good ending!

Reader b: I liked *Burial Rites* because it had a satisfying ending.

Reader e: Like *Romeo and Juliet*, if the book is good enough you still want to [finish it] even if you know. Because it's the last woman to be executed in Iceland, you know how it ends but right until the last minute you think. . .

Reader f: You keep wanting to change it!

Reader e: He's going to bend his comely head and kiss her on the mouth.[46]

Reader b: And she's not going to have her head chopped off!

It appears from this discussion that it is not only Garnons-Williams' 'journey from A to B' or the 'coming at it from different angles' that is extraordinary, but a sense of wanting to 'hold back' the inevitable, even to rewrite the ending. This particular group regularly discussed imagined alternative endings:

> [Of *The Mermaid and Mrs Hancock*]: I thought she was going to leave Mrs Chapelle and go back and work for Mrs Frost [her companion and dresser]. I was quite surprised by the ending actually.
>
> [Of *Swimming Lessons*]: Overall we felt the end was unsatisfactory but it was interesting that some thought Ingrid had drowned and others felt that she had survived (I am in the second camp). I cannot accept that Ingrid would have abandoned her children.

The V & A Group's discussion of *Conversations with Friends* included a discussion of the relative merits of the ending imagined by one of the group and the actual ending:

> I'm trying to think, if it had ended as Frances being in a better place and Nick accidentally calling her and her saying 'I don't need you in my life any more', which is what I was expecting, I actually don't think I would have liked that ending as much in a way, because that is what I was expecting. So I actually quite like that I was surprised and that Frances was in a better place but actually, yeah, 'I will still go back there.'

[46] A reference to the last line of *Precious Bane* by Mary Webb which reader e. had previously described as a favourite ending.

What is interesting here, is that though the groups cited earlier assumed that it is the open or ambiguous ending, such as that of *Swimming Lessons,* that gives the reader the imaginative freedom to 'think beyond the end of the book', in fact it seems that even relatively closed endings of novels allow for this kind of speculation. What matters is how much the reader has been immersed in the world of the novel. This speculation may sometimes be couched as a judgement on how 'realistic' the ending is. For example, the Fort St John Group in Canada enjoyed reading *The Power* (Alderman 2016) which they described as: 'very thought provoking, [it] brought up many new ideas that had us discussing for a long time'. But they also noted that the book divided the group: 'We were divided on if we believed the actions of the characters were accurate. Would women really act that way if given this power? Some said no, and some said absolutely.'

Endings Defining the Literary

The Power is speculative fiction with a relatively closed ending, but it also has a metafictional frame which casts doubt on the veracity of the narrative and the implied author. It was controversial in several groups that discussed it*:*

> *The Power* made everyone very cross because of the cynical nature of the story and it was decided this was not a feminist novel but one about exploitation and repression.
> (Winchester pub group with age range 40–61)

> Some people found the letters in the beginning and at the end of *The Power* a little confusing in terms of the ending.
> (Leeds Apocalyptic/Dystopian group with average age 30)

It is revealing that the 'literary' reading group is concerned by what they perceive as the 'cynicism' of the novel, while the genre reading group finds the literary elements bewildering. Part of this controversy may be in the way that the novel resists categorisation as either 'literary' or 'genre' fiction. This was one of the elements that also made it controversial as the winner of the Bailey's Women's Prize in 2017, as discussed in Chapter Five. I was interested in how reading group members understood the divide between literary fiction and commercial fiction (including genre fiction) and in particular in whether they saw endings as a point of division. Eighteen of the forty-three respondents said that they had no particular expectation of the endings of different genres of fiction. Nineteen respondents did have a fairly clear view on the distinction (though one of these answered that their group never read genre fiction) which the London pub group captured well:

> I would tend to expect 'genre' fiction to have more of a 'resolved' ending, whereas I might expect 'literary' novels to be more ambiguous or unresolved.
> (London pub group)

Some groups reported higher expectations of literary endings:

> [We] expect endings to be well thought-out and appropriate to the story of the novel, if it is a literary novel rather than a popular novel.
> (U3A group, Winchester)

> We love 'literary novels'. In choosing one we're looking for something innovative and engaging a personal style. Usually the ending is in accordance with these.
> (Ropley/Bighton Group)

For some respondents there was a frustration with genre novels that did not meet their expectations of resolution:

> You'd expect genre fiction to tie up an ending – they'll 'tell a story' and need to explain away most (if not all) the unanswered questions.
> (V & A group)

> Personally I'm much more accepting of vague or ambiguous endings in literary novels. If a popular novel does not bring an element of satisfaction at the end, I tend to feel disappointed.
> (Southampton workplace group)

A couple of respondents were somewhat dismissive of literary endings, one noting that 'Man Booker books never seem to end!' while another noted that 'the ones that don't win awards are more readable.'

Reading Sally Rooney at the V & A

I was invited to attend a reading group meeting at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London. The group had chosen *Conversations with Friends* (Rooney 2017), an interesting choice with regard to discussions of the boundaries of literary and commercial fiction and of open endings in fiction. The novel has had bestseller status on both sides of the

Atlantic,[47] it is widely acknowledged as a 'page-turner' and it has attracted the particular opprobrium of Will Self, who remarked 'It's very simple stuff with no literary ambition that I can see.' (Marriot 2019). Another group who reported in their questionnaire that they had read this novel had not been especially enthusiastic, with several members arguing that 'the writing was self-indulgent and the characters were unsympathetic.' They also agreed that 'the ending was ambiguous.' (London pub group). The V & A group were all 'millennials', of the same cohort Rooney is writing about, and to which she also belongs. Most agreed with the London pub group that the characters were unsympathetic but understood this as being a strategic choice on the author's part:

> I think she crafts them to be obnoxious because they're at an age where they want to be obnoxious. And they're full of themselves, and they're at university and they just want to be seen as being smart. So even though I was like 'Oh my God, it's kind of painful to read these conversations!' […] But there's a point to that – that this isn't who they are, and they're very articulate but they often can't articulate their own feelings.

This group had no sense of the novel being self-indulgent:

Reader b: I don't think I've read a book by an author who captures just that current mix of social media, when she kind of moves straight into e-mail or text, or it's a phone conversation and it's so seamlessly done. And actually, how written everything around our relationships are […] – that was just so well done, her kind of new understanding of that.

Reader a:. I also found her WhatsApp and text conversations to be the most true of any I've read in novels. I think it's because she's 27 and gets how we talk!

The use of the pronouns 'we' and 'our' is interesting here and was repeated throughout the meeting. The group saw Rooney as the authentic voice of their generation. The fact that the characters were often irritating was no bar to identifying with them. The group understood them as people they would overhear in the pub, or even as slightly younger and pricklier versions of themselves that they wanted to give advice to. The ending of the book, seen as 'ambiguous' by the London pub group, worked extremely well for the V & A Group because they had completely entered into the world of the novel and wanted to

[47] Nielsen BookScan recorded UK sales of *Conversations with Friends* since first publication in May 2017 as 203,889 copies across hardback and paperback editions (figures from 7th October 2019). US sales at just under 78,000 were reported by Vox on 3rd September 2019 (Grady 2019).

make their own judgements about what happened 'beyond the narrative' as if they were in a pub mulling over the actions of their friendship group:

Reader a: Do you think they'll stay together?

Readers b,c,d: No!

Reader c: If I'm honest I felt a little bit like 'Oh, she's back with Nick!' And so, when there's the 'Come and get me!' […] I assume he does? I was just like 'Oh no, it's another bad decision!'

Reader a: I liked the ending actually. I thought it was neither happy nor sad. It's [...] things just carrying on still. I feel like Frances was in a better place mentally.

The group were unanimous that they did regard this as a literary novel. One member said, 'I regret I didn't read this while I was at university because I absolutely would have loved to have written an essay on it. I would have probably chosen to do my dissertation on it. I think it's fascinating and I definitely think it's literary.' So what is it about the novel that made it clear to the group that it is 'literary'?

Reader a: There are faults with it, but it's maybe the freshness of her dialogue. I was trying to compare it to other voices that we've heard. We've read a lot of new authors. There's an energy about the way she writes dialogue [...] that's probably what would make me read more of her even though I didn't quite like the characters or the decisions they make.

Reader b: It's all done through dialogue, so no flowery passages, or very cerebral paragraphs about what the author's thinking and you're just like 'Wow!, I totally agree!' You get to the end and you're like 'Oh, OK, there's lots to unpick here' but it almost seems surface when you read it for the first time. It's really interesting.

Reader c: I like it when there are novels written by people who you can feel are incredibly intelligent and articulate but they're not being arseholes about it. It's so obvious how clever and quick-witted and knowledgeable she is, but the way she displays it is when any of her characters display that sort of wit, she laughs at them. So it doesn't make you feel stupid as a reader even though I'm just totally in awe of her and think she's incredible.

Reader b's suggestion that 'it almost seems like surface when you read it for the first time' but you later realise that 'there's lots to unpick here', recalls an observation made by John Sutherland in the interview in Chapter Five, of the need for a great novel to have a 'first

reading quality' and a 'second reading quality'. The V & A group described the greedy readability of the book, forcing them to 'turn down social interactions' so that they could read it in a day, but at the meeting they spoke in depth about the thematic subtlety of the novel, including Rooney's intersectional understanding of class, generation and gender to the Irishness of the novel and her depiction of the social realities of the post-recession era in Dublin. They questioned particular authorial decisions, for example, why the leading character, Frances, was portrayed as suffering from endometriosis:

Reader b: I found the endometriosis thing a bit of a curve ball really. I didn't know what to make of that, or understand why it was there.

Reader d: I think it was similar to the gender fluidity thing. It's a thing that happens in people's life but it doesn't have to be the centre of their life. [. . .] In the general social climate it is a thing especially that women speak about but I don't think I ever read it written down as a character suffering from it.

Reader c: It felt almost metaphorical for her internal pain or internal struggle that she was going through. There were these moments where she collapses in the church and it's almost an epiphany moment. There is something of a martyr about her in some of the scenes, building up, that whole period when she's barely eating. There's a suffering [there]. It gave it a lot more depth.

Conclusion

Although not all the groups that read it rated this particular novel so highly, the V & A group's discussion of *Conversations with Friends* illustrates some key elements that readers across the groups rate highly and that seemed to play particularly well within the group context. There was also one anomalous feature in this group's response to their chosen author's work.

First, across the groups, 'readability' and great storytelling is a priority. Reading group members want a novel they can get lost in, that they turn down social interactions for, that they are compelled to get to the end of even if it is 6am. Key descriptors for the books groups most enjoyed included 'carries you along', 'do not want it to end', 'holds my attention', 'swept along with the story', 'flow', 'page-turner', 'fabulous storytelling', 'involving' and 'engaging'. A number of groups noted that books they had not enjoyed

were those that were particularly 'difficult': for example the Winchester 50–60 somethings group listed' '*Beowulf* – very hard! *Austerlitz* by Sebald – no paragraphs!' while one of the Manchester groups noted of *What I Loved* by Hustvedt: 'not disliked by all members (by any means) but *en masse* the group found it quite abstract and hard work.' This storytelling quality does not necessarily imply a structured narrative or a resolved ending. Several groups mentioned that they particularly loved books that offered a 'slice of life': what matters is that they should be 'absorbing', enabling the 'experiencing [of] diverse historical periods or geographic locations.'

Second, the desire for readability does not mean groups are content with novels they perceive as lightweight. Several of the groups were adamant that they did not read commercial or genre fiction at all and one respondent expressed exasperation at several points in the questionnaire that there were members of her group who recommended 'chick-lit because it is easy-to-read. [. . .] Some of us, including me HATE these books!' Reading groups love intellectual stimulus; they hate being patronised. Key descriptors for books the groups had enjoyed included 'thought provoking' 'challenging', 'intellectual', 'wit', 'complex', 'insightful', 'psychological depth', 'clever', 'makes you think'. For books they hadn't enjoyed the terms deployed included 'cheesy', 'pretentious', 'unreadable', 'convoluted', 'mocking', 'predictable' and 'self-indulgent'. A long-running group in Stockport loved Roth's *American Pastoral* for 'the different layers to the story, the contradictory undercurrents of American society, the deconstruction of the American dream.' Sometimes the discussion forces readers to go back through the book 'to gain a better understanding', such as the group who read Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*. Their discussions are not identical to academic critique; as Sutherland noted, it is dangerous to 'put on the professor'. One of the Winchester pub groups noted that in discussing Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* 'some people read more into the ending than others thought was warranted.' Though one group mentioned that they talked about 'narrative conceits, metaphors [and] metafictional instances', more common were groups who wanted to relate their reading to their own lives and experiences.

Third, groups want a narrative that they see as 'realistic' and 'plausible'. The 'believability' of books was frequently interrogated in the questionnaires, with terms including 'far-fetched', 'cheated', 'fake' and 'unconvincing'. Sometimes, specific episodes were criticised as being 'unlikely', such as the University of the Third Age group's judgement of *The Paying*

Guests. Endings in particular were frequently criticised as being 'over-neat', 'unrealistic' or 'contrived'. Conversely, some groups liked to corroborate the authenticity of books from their historical knowledge or professional experience. For example, when the Waterstones group discussed their response to *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine,* a group member with a medical background endorsed the ending of the book – in which it is revealed that Eleanor's trauma has created a delusion that her abusive mother is still alive – as 'entirely believable'.

Fourth, readers are looking for something new. This may be an original voice like Sally Rooney's, or a way in to a period of history such as *The Miniaturist,* or an unfamiliar culture such as *A God in Every Stone.* The Bampton group loved Shamsie's *A God in Every Stone* but did not enjoy Barry's *The Secret Scripture* because they felt the story of repression by religious bodies in Ireland had been heard too many times before. This point recalls Juliet Mabey's views, cited in the previous chapter, of what readers look for in novels, as 'opening up cultures and historical periods and events in a way that people are willing to go there.' Indeed, one of the reasons that readers attend reading groups seems to be that it forces them to go outside their comfort zone in their reading. The Ropley/Bighton group noted that: 'Occasionally initial reluctance for one or two to start a title has resulted in conversion.' It seems perhaps, unlikely that the North Hants No. 1 Reading Group would have chosen to read *A Short History of Seven Killings* outside of the group context, though on this occasion it did not result in any conversions. Key descriptors used by reading groups in this context included 'finding something new', 'unusual', 'dropped the reader into another time', 'diverse historical periods', 'beautifully written about a different culture', 'unexpected', 'surprisingly wonderful'.

Fifth, the group context seems to favour humane, empathy generating stories over miserable, depressing or violent narratives. Mistry's *A Fine Balance* was described by the Bampton group as 'too much misery' for some readers. Key descriptive terms used by readers for books they did not like included 'disturbing', 'uncomfortable', 'disgust', 'violent', 'offensive', tawdry', 'nasty', 'bitter'.

Sixth, groups are not afraid to discuss their affective responses to books as well as their intellectual responses. Though the questionnaire format tended to favour more analytical responses, respondents did record that they 'fervently loved' books, 'detested' them or were 'aggrieved' by them. Discussions may start with someone having 'a strong feeling

either positive or negative' about the book and continue with expressions of 'joy, surprise or disappointment in the ending'. Readers' affective (and sometimes visceral) discourse became clearer in the participant-observations. A member of the Waterstones group described 'the hairs on the back of [the] head stand[ing] up' as he read the ending of *A Shout in the Ruins*. One member of the North Hants No. 1 group compared a passage of *The Mermaid and Mrs Hancock* to 'the feeling you get when you go on a ghost train – that sort of oooh-ah – shivery sort of . . .' while another said of the ending of Mary Webb's *Precious Bane*: 'It's all warm and cosy and fuzzy and I love that.'

Finally, reading groups are rarely respecters of literary reputation. Novels by Booker prizewinners are routinely described as 'unreadable, offensive, coarse and pretentious'.[48] The North Hants No. 1 group clearly had little time for Ian McEwan:

Reader b: He can certainly write, he's just terribly pleased with himself.

Reader c: He thinks he knows everything.

Reader d: He's showing off.

Reader b: *Atonement* is absolutely fantastic.

Reader c: That might be his book. All his other books haven't been anything close. People just keep writing them, don't they?

This is the single point on which the V & A group significantly differed. Their discussions of Sally Rooney were adulatory, bearing all the hallmarks of fandom, including comments such as 'I'm just totally in awe of her and think she's incredible' and 'I love how we're so obsessed with her!' This was an author the group saw as representative of their generation and they understood her as a cultural icon. They were nonetheless sceptical about her longevity as a writer, interpreting the authenticity of her voice as indicating an absence of 'writerly craft' in her portrayals of a generation, as if the novels are autobiography rather than fiction. It was suggested that 'she'll quit while she's ahead' and 'go back to debating – she could basically debate for Ireland'. None of the group suggested that she might go on to write a completely different kind of novel.

For the majority of groups, it seems that the narrative elements outlined above are more important, within the group setting, than the particular form of the ending. The author's

[48] This was the U3A group's view of Howard Jacobson's *The Finkler Question*.

'responsibility to the reader' at the end of the novel is, primarily to offer an ending that feels 'true to the story' or at any rate does not disrupt it. As the Topsham group suggested: 'As far as an ending goes, as long as it conforms to the rest of the book (i.e. the logic and flow is there) then I have no expectations.' The 'appropriate' ending that groups talk about seems close to the idea of 'landing', as expressed by writers and literary industry interviewees in the preceding chapters. A well-judged ending (which may be akin to a coda in music, as the Manchester 'creative' group suggested) may be the 'icing on the cake' of a highly regarded book. However, a book that scores very highly in terms of the criteria discussed above may be forgiven a weaker ending or even sometimes a thoroughly disruptive one. The Manchester 'creative' group listed *Anatomy of a Miracle* (Miles 2018) as a favourite book: 'Everyone enjoyed the narrator, the descriptive verve, finding someone new, the wit, the intellectual level. […] Some found the ending a little too neat, but it didn't spoil the book.' At least one of the reading groups surveyed here had read each of the three books whose endings most bewildered literary industry respondents,[49] and in no case did it seem that readers were perturbed by them.

I would suggest the reading group context tends to prize most highly those books that have both what Sutherland described as a 'first reading quality' and a 'second reading quality'. They need the first in order to be swept up by the book as individual readers. This is especially important in the reading group context since readers may be reading a book they would not have chosen for themselves and since they are reading to a deadline. They need the second in order to have a productive and challenging discussion, which may include flicking back through the book to make sense of an ambiguous ending or a new perspective, drawing other readers' attention to surprising or difficult passages or arguing over different interpretations. As a member of the Topsham group reported: 'Our preconceived ideas are so different. But I think we all agreed that reading the books is a good thing. I am certainly enriched by them.'

[49] *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine*, *The Miniaturist* and *A God in Ruins*

Chapter Seven – The Role of Endings in the Creation, Production and Reception of the Novel

Introduction

Part Two follows a chronological trajectory, starting with the novelist's first spark of an idea and their journey through the writing process, to the selection and editing of the novel by, first the literary agent, then the editor, through to the judgements of 'the few', in the form of literary prize judges and 'the many' in the form of book club readers. We saw that endings were a particular point of focus for the different groups studied in different ways throughout this trajectory. For authors they may function as a point of destination that drives the writing, whether 'a little nugget at the end […] you have to dig for' (Carthew) or a full 'tractor-beam' guiding the narrative (Norris); as such they are often a meeting point between inspiration or instinct and learned craft. Reaching the ending of a first draft may be the first point at which the author can conceive of showing the draft to an agent or editor, beginning its journey from private to public. For the literary industry, endings are a site at which different forms of professional reading converge, raising questions on several levels. First, during the process of selection they may define, or be defined by the novel's genre; they may be a site where the agent or editor's own taste comes to the fore since, unlike beginnings, they are rarely read by colleagues; they may also be regarded as a particular locus of realisation of the author's 'authentic' vision. During the editing process endings may require careful intervention to balance the integrity of the author's vision, the emotional force of the narrative and aesthetic properties including pace, rhythm and 'landing'. In terms of reception they may be a factor in whether a novel makes it onto a prize shortlist and they are perceived as important for word-of-mouth marketing. For readers, endings are important first as a measure of how engaging the book is as a reading experience. They are a common feature of book group discussion; a site of judgement of the novel as a whole – sometimes a site of argument (though rarely the key site of disagreement between group members); and a site of affective engagement. Despite the concerns of some agents and publishers about reader reactions to very open or destabilising endings, the research showed readers in book groups to be open to a wide ranging of closural possibilities and often more critical about 'over-neat' resolutions than

very open endings.[50] What book club readers (at least those who make it to the ending) seek is an 'authentic' ending that isn't 'cynical' and feels true to the story; something also privileged in authors' accounts: the idea that, in Carthew's words, 'you haven't lied to me this whole way'.

Endings and the Process of 'Making Public'

This chapter seeks to draw out common themes and common vocabularies from the different groups studied. It also seeks to understand the relationship between the three groups in the process of making the novel public, and the impact that has on the form of the published novel, the ending in particular. The research suggests that the 'making public' of the novel is indeed a process rather than as something that happens at the moment of publication. According to literary agent Gordon Wise: 'I always say to writers, you start off writing [your book] for yourself, and then you may share it with a few friends, and if you've done a writing course maybe twenty people have read it, but ultimately you want hundreds of thousands of people to read that book. You don't have to listen to all of their advice but you need to hear their reactions to what you're trying to achieve.' The novel begins as something in the mind of one author; at a certain point, it is shared with a 'first reader', often the literary agent, but it may, as Wise suggests, be a course tutor or a creative writing group. At the next stage it will be submitted to editors and then shared with others at the publishing house. When a full manuscript is delivered, first the agent and then the editor(s) will give the author notes and suggest revisions. Once a final manuscript has been submitted and accepted, the novel will be copy-edited. In none of these stages is the form of the novel fixed – indeed, with literary novels, as we have seen, editorial interventions frequently result in major structural revisions. Even after first publication, the form of the novel is not necessarily stable: significant changes, including revisions to the ending, may be made to US editions to satisfy what is perceived as a difference in taste between European and American audiences[51] and in foreign editions the art of the

[50] It is notable that publishers and agents understood book group selections as tending towards what the academic literature might understand as 'middlebrow' novels: Lucy Luck was representative in suggesting that 'because I'm on the more literary side [...] I don't represent traditional book group fiction'. In the groups I researched it was clear that selections were made from a wide range of fiction and that many groups were not afraid to tackle complex and demanding novels. Nonetheless book group culture itself may be understood as middlebrow within the terms laid out by Driscoll (2014:6) and discussed in the Introduction.

[51] Sometimes not by the author: Grimwood's US publisher asked him to edit his thriller *Moskva* for the American market: 'I said no, but you're very welcome to have it done in house if you want. So that's what they've done.'

translator may transform the book into, effectively, a new work – still an iteration of the original but with significant differences.[52] The interviews suggest a range of reasons for such editorial interventions including adjustments to pace or rhythm, ensuring a consistent focus on a 'thread that draws through' the novel, clearer character motivations, and different cultural sensibilities, but most are concerned foundationally with the idea of responsibility to the reader. This is not meant cynically: the reader is not necessarily synonymous with the consumer here; neither writers nor publishers of literary fiction are primarily concerned with giving the reader what they want or expect at a book's ending. But, as Lucy Luck put it: 'in not giving the reader what they want, there has to be some kind of emotional satisfaction.' The reading groups surveyed wanted endings to be 'authentic' while some of the writers referred to the idea of a 'contract' between the author and the reader. This recalls the nineteenth century idea discussed in Part One that authors will deal responsibly with audiences. Parker and Binder referred to this in 1978 (132) as 'a now diminished expectation'; the research suggests that the expectation endures on the part of writers, publishers and readers, especially at the book's ending.

I turn to two sociological accounts to help make sense of the relationship between creators, producers and consumers in the process of making the novel public, why some aspects of this process are more visible to literary studies than others and why attention to contextual aspects of literary production as well as textual aspects provides a richer view of how narrative is shaped and endings are conceived. The first is *Under the Cover* (Childress 2017) in which he integrates perspectives from the fields of creation, production and reception in a study of a single novel. The second is Bourdieu's analysis of the field of cultural production (1993).

Childress's 'Joined-Up' Model

In framing his study of Cornelia Nixon's novel *Jarrettsville* (2009), Childress traces the longstanding divisions in material culture between studies of production and studies of reception,[53] arguing that we risk losing sight of the meaning of the object if we do not study it across both fields:

[52] Both Garnons-Williams and Mabey noted the considerable freedom for a translator to make changes to a book, suggesting that it is very rare that the original agent or publisher would check a translated edition.
[53] Childress notes that while Bourdieu worked on production and consumption, he did so in separate studies.

> Because different elements of cultural objects have been split apart across disciplines and subfields, it is not just harder to make sense of their multiplicity, but it is also harder to make sense of them as wholes. Once you have entirely bracketed out the twists and turns of a novel's creation, it's hard, if not impossible to fully understand what an editor or marketing rep are doing as they balance the text they're working on with the context they're working under. For cultural reception, a novel can be treated as being of infinitely variable meanings only if all the years of work by an author and publisher to make it meaningful at all have also been bracketed out as an 'unobservable' prehistory to reader engagement. (2017:4)

Childress claims that calls for integration of the fields have been made for decades, but with very rare exceptions (e.g. Griswold 2000), they have gone unheeded as the two fields have moved further apart both conceptually and methodologically. In fact, for Childress, these two traditional fields of sociological analysis are inadequate in understanding cultural production; he argues that for both production and reception scholars the author is often considered only as the supplier of 'the raw materials so that the "real" work could be done'(2017:7). Expanding Griswold's notion of a 'complex' of creation, production and reception, Childress maps four interrelated fields, adding consumption to Griswold's three fields.[54]

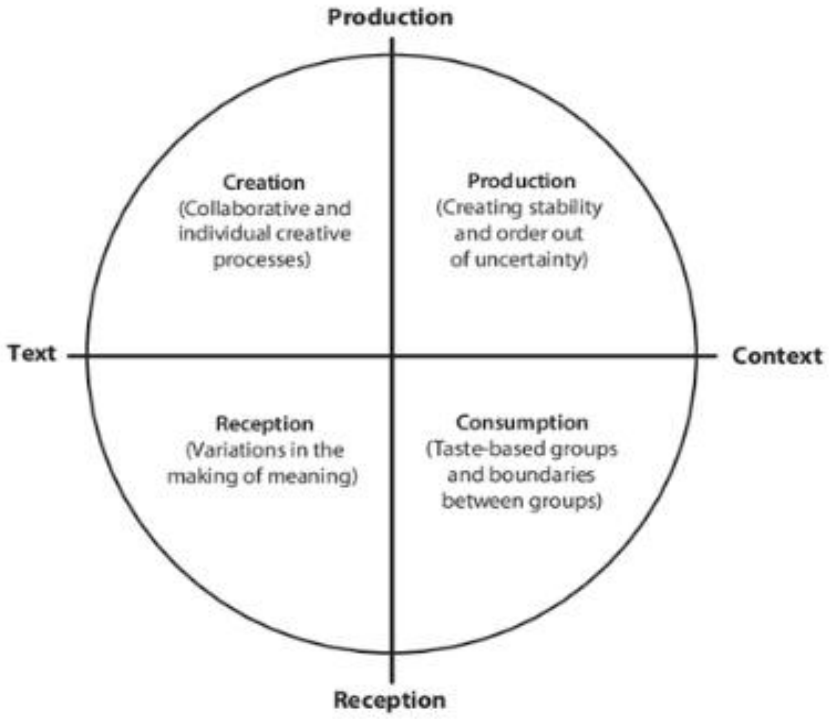

Figure 4: The Friendly 'Divvying-Up' of Material Culture (Childress 2017: 6)

[54] One weakness of Childress's study is that he does not fully distinguish the fields of consumption and reception.

I should note here the influence on publishing studies of Robert Darnton's 'communication circuit' (1982). Darnton maps the textual transmission from author to reader not on a linear model, but as part of a circuit showing the role and the relationality of multiple players. He incorporates authors, agents, publishers, printers, paper manufacturers, distributors and booksellers. While Darnton's model was originally designed to map the book trade from 1500 –1800, it has been regarded as a relatively accurate model for understanding the relationships that underpin the circulation of intellectual property right through until the late twentieth century. His original intention in putting forward this model was to integrate the disparate elements of the discipline of book history, which he argued 'was suffering from fissiparousness: experts were pursuing such specialized studies that they were losing contact with one another.' (2007:495). His aim was to demonstrate how the parts formed a whole. Why then, does my study follow a chronological trajectory, drawing on Childress's less nuanced mapping of the four fields of cultural production? The primary reason is that, as Adams and Baker argue (1993), Darnton's central focus is on relationships between people rather than on the book per se: the industry, rather than its outputs. Darnton acknowledges this critique in a 2007 article, noting that he is a social historian and his model was created following two decades of research into the workers of the eighteenth century book world. While useful revisions of Darnton's model have been proposed since, including a series of models from Squires and Murray (2013) reflecting the disruption and disintermediation of the contemporary digital publishing environment; my purpose in understanding these relationships is to form a close understanding of the development of the book itself as, primarily, a vessel for content and only secondarily as a material object. I want to focus on how form is negotiated between authors, agents and editors and how it is received by readers. I felt that a more complex model would detract from my emphasis on the *literary* in literary production. In revisiting his article in 2007 Darnton noted: 'The tendency toward fragmentation and specialization still exists. Another way to cope with it might be to urge book historians to confront three main questions: How do books come into being? How do they reach readers? What do readers make of them?' (2007:495). This is precisely the focus I intend.

Darnton's model is exemplary in showing the relationships between fields and this is vital to my project. However, this sense of relationality appears in Childress's account too and, as we will see, it is theorised by Bourdieu. The author's creative work moves through the communications circuit to, and through, the field of production, but its aim is always to

speak eloquently and directly to the readers who are valuing, interpreting and making sense of it. Conversely, the notion, discussed above, of the author's 'responsibility to the reader', or the premise of transactional theories of reader response that textual meaning is negotiated between author and reader, may elide the role of the field of production as a conduit – a means of making public – with publishers as the work's semi-public 'first' readers. Childress shows these relationships in a separate diagram.

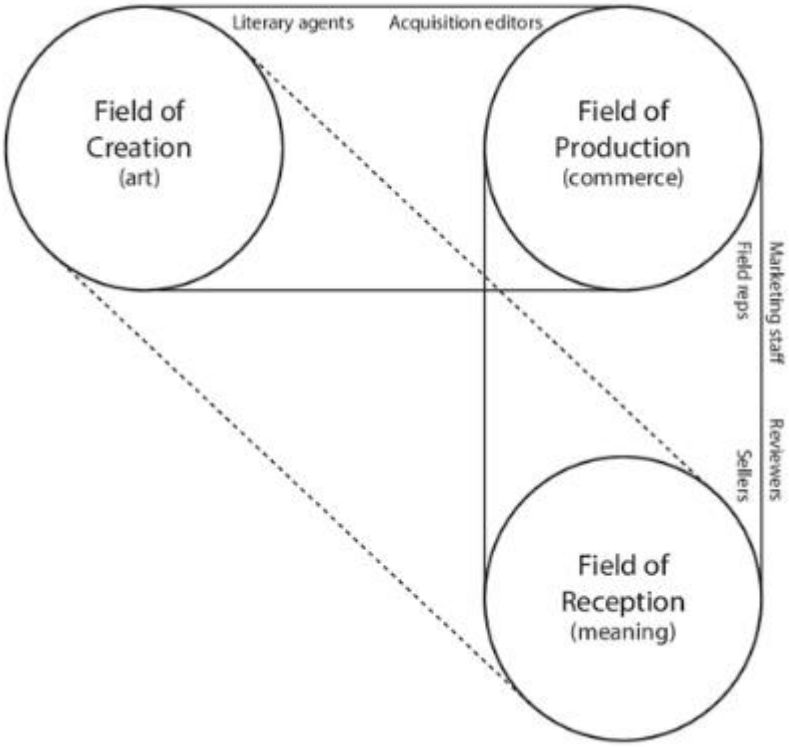

Figure 5: Three Interdependent Fields of Creation, Production and Reception (Childress 2017: 10)

Also clear in Figure 7.2 is the position of literary agents and editors, poised between the fields of creation and production, with agents, whose key role is to represent the interests of the authors closer to the former and editors closer to the latter. This provides context to Laura Williams' observation in Chapter Five, that agents think 'specifically about the book and making sure everything work[s], and [editors are] thinking more broadly about the audience.' Childress maps the complex evaluative processes of agents and editors to their positions between fields. He suggests a three-pronged strategy in literary agents' decision-making: emotional connection, which draws on individual taste, interests and experiences; judgements on artistic ability which is based on their proximity to the field of creation; and

judgements on market feasibility which is based on their proximity to the field of production (2017:72). Regarding editors' decision making, he adds a fourth prong, of 'publisher fit', which is a judgement based on editors' closer proximity to the field of production and by extension to the field of consumption. Can the editor convince their colleagues that this is the right book for the company's profile or 'brand'? (2017: 93–4). While Childress is concerned explicitly with the process of editorial selection here (rather than editing, for example) his understanding of editorial processes in terms of relational proximity offers a helpful explanatory underpinning for my observations in Chapter Five concerning the 'three modes of reading' engaged in by agents and editors in their relationship with author and text and these, in turn, vindicate Childress's claim. Their role as 'first readers' draws on an emotional connection to the work which is an aspect of individual taste, as 'critical readers' they draw on their proximity to the field of creation; while as 'attuned readers' they draw on their proximity to the fields of production and consumption.

Bourdieu, Contemporary Cultural Production and Literary Taste

Discussions of the negotiation between literary and commercial aspects of the novel raise the spectre of Pierre Bourdieu. For Bourdieu the field of cultural production is characterised by a struggle between autonomous and heteronomous principles: broadly, art for art's sake or art that is bound up in commercial imperatives existing within the field of power. A 'field' is simply any structured space of social positions, comprising both individuals and organisations, whose place in the field is determined by their capital – whether that is economic, social or cultural capital, or indeed symbolic capital.[55] Each field is governed by its own structures, logic and what Bourdieu refers to as 'habitus', which he also calls a 'feel for the game'. Taste, for Bourdieu, is not innate, but is conditioned by our social field and its habitus. So, in such terms, we might understand editors' and agents' role as 'first readers' as more circumscribed by their attunement to the fields of production and consumption than would be inferred from Childress's model or than they understand themselves. From the perspective of the autonomous field, Bourdieu acknowledges that publishers (like art-gallery owners) may be seen as: 'equivocal figures, through whom the logic of the economy is brought to the heart of the sub-field of production. They are

[55] Defined by Bourdieu as 'the form that the various species of capital assume when they are perceived and recognized as legitimate' (Bourdieu 1989:17).

"merchants in the temple", making their living by tricking the artist or writer into taking the consequences of his or her statutory professions of disinterestedness.' (1993:39)

Central to Bourdieu is the notion of relationality: each field is a structured space of co-determined positions and position-taking. He understands 'the literary or artistic field [as] a field of forces, but it is also a field of struggles tending to transform or conserve this field of forces' (1993:30). Bourdieu demonstrates the logic of the field by reference to nineteenth century French literature, but it remains highly pertinent to contemporary perceptions of how we should understand the structures of the literary industry in relation to artistic autonomy and integrity. His model gives context to the clear imperative, revealed in each of the previous chapters for authors, publishers and readers to define their own position in the field and explain its habitus. This was demonstrated, for example in Menmuir's account of publishing his first novel with an independent literary press so that he didn't have to make compromises; Sutton and Gallenzi's assurances that they would never change an ending for commercial reasons; and Gallenzi's statement of the responsibility of the literary publisher to 'keep the flame alive'. Symbolic capital, at the 'literary' end of the publishing industry is bound up in the idea of this being a largely autonomous field in which the authentic vision of the author is communicated to readers, whether those readers are critics, academics or ordinary readers, with the agent and editor distinguished in this field by their literary taste. Readers and reading groups may also be keen to define themselves by their literary taste, making clear that they enjoy intellectual, complex, challenging novels and expressing their impatience with books that are 'easy to read' with nothing to discuss. There was also a clear sense of position-taking within the field from interviewees who did not define themselves as 'literary insiders'. For example, Imogen Robertson dismissed the lack of craft of some literary novels, suggesting that authors working in commercial fiction would not get away with such 'weak-arsed endings'. When Sam Baker recalls 'somebody from the literary world' asking her 'basically […] who made you the person that decides whether or not a book is good. It wasn't that rude but it was intellectually snidey. And I thought "well, I'm here because I sell books. The reality is, if I say I like a book on Twitter, it goes up on Amazon."' Baker is not, here, defending her own position in relation to the field of power, rather she is drawing attention to the literary industry's denial that it is a heteronomous field. She views her mission as democratic: 'Surely our job is to make more people want to read a book?' A similar point was made by John Sutherland in talking about The Booker: 'The origin was really to put more fuel in the engine of the publishing industry.

[…] It wasn't necessarily cynical because the secondary motive was to get people to read books.'

The contemporary pertinence of the autonomous/heteronomous divide is evident in the publication of a report by Arts Council England (ACE) in December 2017 on the publishing climate for literary fiction (Bhaskar, Millar and Barreto 2017) which forms the background context for the literary industry interviews in Chapter Five. The report's authors argue that the plummeting sales and stagnant prices of the past decade has led to a crisis for authors, publishers and readers, pointing to the precarity of writing careers and the lack of visibility of ethnic minority, working class and non-metropolitan writers and publishers and suggesting that mainstream publishers' increasing aversion to risk is damaging literary experimentation. They are nonetheless clear about the creative dynamism of the sector, praising in particular the flowering of new independent presses devoted to literary fiction. In their response (Arts Council England 2017), ACE state that 'historically there has been an assumption that literary fiction fell within the sphere of commercial publishing and therefore required little in the way of direct intervention.' The word 'historically' is undefined in the report and could have done with some more historical nuance. Until the late 1970s there was de facto support for literary fiction in terms of substantial funding for public libraries which would routinely take several thousand copies of each new literary novel. The crisis in literary fiction in the late 1970s (see Sutherland 1978) was partially prompted by cuts to public services and the gradual erosion of this indirect subsidy as well as the encroachment of corporate publishing into a field that had previously been viewed as the domain of a generation of 'gentleman publishers'[56] such as Allen Lane and Victor Gollancz. The shifting habitus of the field led, in fact, to a boom period for literary fiction in the 1980s but also what might be understood as a ceding of the autonomy of the field, with the rise of literary 'super-agents' such as Andrew Wylie and Ed Victor and huge advances doled out to literary stars such as Amis or Rushdie.[57] This background of financial success is no doubt the context that Arts Council England are referring to. In discussing the ACE report agent Lucy Luck explained:

> The 1990s was an incredibly good time to be in publishing, especially literary publishing, because you got ridiculous advances, Faber & Faber were making so much money from *Cats* they didn't even know what to do with it […] and there

[56] A common term for the immediate postwar generation of publishers (see Fredric Warburg's autobiography *An Occupation for Gentlemen* (1959).
[57] I trace these developments in more detail in Wintersgill (2018)

> were all these new voices coming through as well. You can't compare now with then, except for realising that everything has fallen off a cliff.

Within the contemporary cultural sphere there are fields that have been remained relatively autonomous, for example dance and theatre both receive considerable subsidy,[58] while the habitus for literary fiction seems to be in flux between autonomous and heteronomous poles. Most of my interviewees discussed and welcomed ACE's announcement of increased funding for the sector,[59] which encompasses grants for both individual authors and independent literary publishers and investment into the development of diversity.

Literary publishers' sense of the sector as a balancing act between autonomy and heteronomy is not, in general, shared by academic critics who tend to view the entire publishing industry as the heteronomous pole of the field of cultural production. This is especially so in academic literary studies where there is a palpable tension between professional and academic forms of valuing. In arguing that a 'contemporary history of the book' should be a priority for the emerging subdiscipline of contemporary literary studies, Eaglestone notes that:

> [E]very academic working in contemporary fiction has at least one bad story about trade publishers and agents. While some can be very helpful, in the main agents, and trade publishers are very unhelpful and resistant to academics. They do not see the point of us, which is odd as we sell many, many thousands of copies of their books to our students […] and more importantly we create the intellectual and cultural infrastructure within in which their business grows. (2013:1096)

The counterclaim may be that publishers and agents perceive that *academics* don't see the point of *them*, or at least not beyond their 'heteronomous' functions. In examining the reduced influence of university English on the cultural infrastructure, Eve (2016:16) posits 'an "anxiety of academia" within the space of literary production', a sense that academic modes of valuing are at odds with the priorities of the information-dominated knowledge economy. This notion of publishers as 'market gatekeepers' is not necessarily one that publishers recognise and it is also contested within publishing studies and book history scholarship. Thompson argues that the term 'gatekeeper' 'greatly simplifies the complex

[58] In 2017 23% of Arts Council England's overall budget went to theatre, 11% to dance and 7% to literature, most of which funded poetry or literature in translation.
[59] An additional £38 Million a year in addition to the approximately £15.3 Million per year allocated during the previous funding period.

forms of interaction and negotiation between authors, agents and publishers that shape the creative process' (2010:17), while Bhaskar (2016:108) explains his preference for the term 'curator' rather than 'gatekeeper':

> It's not just that curators are selectors; they're expert selectors.[. . .] Their curation is based on judgements and instincts honed by tens of thousands of hours of learning and immersion. Good taste, one diffuse but central idea behind curated selections, is carefully cultivated.

In an article reporting on a series of interviews with agents and editors in New York, Henningsgaard speculates on the rarity of other such interviews in the literature, suggesting that researchers' frequent recourse to a (simplified) Bourdieusian framework may lead to a devaluing of the statements of individual subjects in favour of structural considerations, especially regarding the role of personal taste in editorial decision making (2019:665–7). In Henningsaard's view, agents and publishers are 'undoubtedly professional readers. Nonetheless their engagement with books often more closely resembles the engagement of a fan (which is a type of 'ordinary' reader) rather than a critic or scholar (types of professional readers).' (2019:666). The research presented in the previous chapters bears out a view of agents and editors as literary enthusiasts who want to share their enthusiasm, but when I came to analyse the interviews, the concept of 'fandom', and the contrast between the 'ordinary' and 'professional' reader seemed too crude a set of descriptors to encapsulate the complexities of the subjects' engagement with literary texts, suggesting the need for a more nuanced and sophisticated account of the different modes of reading that agents, publishers and prize judges engage in at different points of the publishing process and indeed sometimes enact simultaneously. What is often omitted in work that draws on Bourdieu's account of the structuring of taste is his argument that habitus may be swiftly disrupted when new agents or organisations appear, instituting a new habitus that stand in tension with the existing one, generating often unpredictable change. What the empirical work reported on in the preceding chapters reveals is a complex, dialectical relationship between the agency of individual actors with their own tastes and enthusiasms and the structure of the literary marketplace. This is demonstrated, for example in Garnons-Williams' account of puzzling over the commercial and critical success of books that as a reader she regarded as having 'difficult' endings such as *The Miniaturist* and *A God in Ruins*, and calibrating her own views against reader responses recorded on Goodreads to inform her editorial practice. In another recent empirical study, Squires (2017) interviewed 19 UK commissioning editors, to examine the discursive

strategies surrounding editorial practice within publishing companies. She asked questions about the relationship between taste and commercial structure, finding (as I did) that editors regularly talked of their gut feelings and visceral responses to books that excited them, but that some also suggested that these instinctive responses were honed by years of experience:

> Some publishers problematised the idea of taste, with one editor from a mid-sized company seeing it as 'a strange, slightly effete aristocratic idea, when actually it's about […] skill […] about understanding technically how storytelling works and […] what a character's trying to do, and how people are going to relate to it. (2017:30)

Literary taste is best seen as a balance of instinct and informed judgement. The fact that it is honed by experience and circumscribed by habitus should not undermine the value of an individual affective and visceral response to work that is new enough to disrupt expectations and to shift habitus. The complexity of the reading experience described in Chapter Five is that it incorporates both forms of response and recognises their interrelationship. Crucially, as we saw in Jauss's account (1970) discussed in Chapter Two, expectations have to be there in the first place to be disrupted. Jauss's claim that readers' perspectives on a text are always going to be conditioned by a 'horizon of expectations' applies as much to professional readers as to recreational readers. To be excited by a book, we – and they – require a 'horizon of change' that challenges expectations.

Converging Perspectives

Childress's study of *Jarretsville* focuses on a single author, a single genre, a single publisher to offer a lens on wider processes influencing and linking the fields of creation, production and reception. My research design acknowledges, like Childress's, that a literary novel does not emerge intact from the field of creation but is negotiated in relation to the fields of production and reception and with consideration to the field of consumption,[60] but I operate on a reverse trajectory, starting from the general and moving to the particular. We have uncovered a range of perspectives on endings from novelists, publishers and readers working on different books and across different genres. We can now begin to extract common vocabularies of description and evaluation from across the three fields. We can

[60] While I do not study the field of consumption in a separate chapter in this thesis (e.g. through a study of bookshops) it is considered at several points, for example in discussions of the role of endings in word-of-mouth marketing, the search for the 'sweetspot' novel and the commercial value of literary prizes.

assess whether the journey from private (the mind of the author), to semi-public (the 'first readers' of the publishing industry), to public (readers) outlined above has an influence on narrative structure and consider what is the nature of that influence. We can examine whether considerations of genre are relevant in thinking about this process – does the navigation between 'literary' and 'commercial' elements play a role in negotiations over form? Are there tensions between fields, e.g. between author and publisher? What value do such negotiations have in terms of reader response and do readers notice and value the same elements as authors and publishers? We can also assess whether these discourses are distinct from, or related to the literary critical discourses outlined in Part One, and we can decide which aspects of the research to take forward into the close readings of Part Three.

If this chapter brings together the converging perspectives of critics, creators, producers and consumers it also draws attention to the special properties of endings as sites of convergence. I propose to organise the questions above into three broad categories of convergence, drawing out elements that may be useful in augmenting our critical vocabulary with practice-derived perspectives. First, in terms of literary creation and production, endings may be understood as a meeting point of art and craft, that of the writer and of the editor. These negotiations between art and craft have particular resonance in terms of expectations of genre. Second, in terms of reader response, I suggest that endings seem to be a meeting point of affective and intellectual engagement with the text. I discuss forms of aesthetic resolution (e.g. the musicality of endings, the journey's end) as primarily a conduit to affective engagement, and forms of cognitive resolution (e.g. tying up loose ends, or conversely undermining or destabilising the prior narrative) as a component of intellectual engagement. They may also involve forms of resolution that cannot be neatly ascribed to either category (e.g. the thread that draws the reader through the novel, providing psychological resolution in terms of the character's trajectory and the reader's identification with it). Third, endings are a meeting point between writer and reader: the point in the text where the relationship becomes apparent – sometimes explicitly in a direct address to the reader – and at which the reader can see and judge the effects of the author's work.

Art and Craft

The challenge for publishers in balancing their instincts and tastes with informed critical and commercial judgements is mirrored in the challenge for authors in navigating between artistic inspiration and learned craft in their writing. Authors interviewed for Chapter Four used different terminologies for such negotiations: Jackson understood it as 'drawing certain parts of the process into the critical light' but still allowing 'room for the voodoo'. Such negotiations, important throughout the processes of writing and editing, come into intense focus at the end of the narrative. Carthew talked of reaching the end in a 'Eureka moment' then having to 'pull the rest of the book up to that standard.' Robertson talked of the need for 'two heads' in constructing endings. She argued that literary novels frequently disappoint at the ending because ambiguous endings still require structure and authors don't think enough about craft. If endings call attention to the author's negotiation between their creative and critical brains, negotiations between authors and editors add a further degree of complexity. The ending, at first draft stage, seems to be a key site of intervention by the agent or the editor. One editor talked of novels that are 'shut down far too quickly', another talked of wanting to add a '3D effect to the novel without changing the style of it.' A literary agent described more intense editing of the final two pages of a novel than of the rest of the book put together 'because getting that ending, which is the climax of the book, it's this really difficult, sophisticated thing to pull off.'

This becomes a particular challenge in the definition of literary fiction. O'Gorman and Eaglestone argue that genre fiction 'accepts, develops or challenges (and so reinforces) generic conventions of content, plot, style, form and so on, consensually understood by its readers, writers and publishers' while 'the literary remains in a deep way free and unbound.'(2018:6). As discussed with regard to literary history in Part One and examined through reading group responses in Part Two, endings are a key site at which such literary-genre distinctions become apparent. We might look especially, for example, at the endings of novels that draw on genre forms but open new horizons of literary expectation with them such as Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, discussed in Chapter Nine. However, O'Gorman and Eaglestone's distinction does not necessarily map on to the literary/genre distinctions understood by the publishing industry, in the sense that whether a book is published as genre or literary may be in part an artefact of its publishing history or a choice made by the agent or editor. As Bryony Woods explained, genre matters most to the agent in terms of

which editor she decides to send a book to. We might also recall Grimwood's experience, that the most creative freedom he experienced in his career as a writer was in publishing science fiction with Gollancz; his experience of publishing a literary novel with Canongate was more circumscribed by publisher expectations. There is, nonetheless, a widespread perception (both public and critical and reflected in the defensive statements of some of those I approached for interviews) that endings of commercial fiction may be 'crafted' for a market or to meet the expectations of a genre, but that endings of literary fiction should be the authentic expression of an author's vision.[61] Editors and agents working on literary fiction stressed that they offered careful nudges to their authors rather than rewriting their work: 'the validity is in raising the question. The author then has to make that their own.' In other words, if readers are looking to find the 'identity theme' (in Holland's phrase) of the writer on the page, the job of the editor **i**s to clarify that voice without altering it. There is a sense of editors as a spectral presence behind the contemporary literary novel. In her collection of interviews with editors, Greenberg argues that 'editors are by and large reluctant to draw attention to their own work, perceiving it as something that could harm the text's relationship with both author and reader' (2015:1). The hidden nature of editorial intervention in literary texts may make it difficult to consider as part of our critical discussions of narrative form and reader response in the contemporary novel but it should not invalidate the attempt. As Foucault suggests (1992:309) we need to go beyond the idea of the author-creator to examine the role of the 'author-function' (including this 'invisible' work by editors) in the series of 'precise and complex procedures' and social relationships that underpin the articulation of discourse.

The interviews suggest significant distinctions in editorial practice between Penguin's highly interventionist work on commercial thrillers and Canongate's subtle editing of the same author's literary novel, but they also suggest that that this is not only about genre but concerns the nature of the publisher. There does seem to be something of a divide in editorial practice between the Big Five commercial publishers, powerful larger

[61] It is worth drawing attention here to Childress's account of editorial negotiations over the ending of Cornelia Nixon's *Jarrettsville*. The publisher agreed to contract the book only if the author agreed to a major structural change in moving part of the end of the book to the beginning. The publisher's contention was that introducing more complexity of form would position the book as a literary rather than a commercial novel. Here, revisions to the ending were deemed necessary to ensure that the form of the novel matched the literary quality of the author's voice. This presents a counter-argument to claims that requirements for significant revisions to the ending of a novel tend to be the preserve of the commercial novel. (Childress 2017:126). However, it does still suggest a key distinction between the two in terms of expectations around endings.

independents such as Faber and Bloomsbury, and a slew of new literary independents including Oneworld, Alma and Salt Books. In discussing her work with Penguin, Fuller made clear that 'I get no feel that I'm editing, or being edited for marketing or sales.' Nonetheless she reported her editor as advising that readers would not be happy with a wholly open ending for one of her central characters in *Swimming Lessons*: 'they'd want just something, some indication that possibly she's alive or possibly she's dead'. This may not be editing for marketing or sales directly, but it is editing with an eye to the reception and consumption of the book rather than simply its aesthetic success. Garnons-Williams, as an editor for Fourth Estate, an imprint of Harper Collins with a clear commitment to literary quality and distinctiveness, also spoke in detail about the storytelling quality of the books she works on and ensuring responsibility to the reader. Menmuir spoke of the freedom of publishing for Salt, in being able to ignore the frustrations of his professional readers about lack of resolution, believing he could find the kind of reader who would want that ambiguity. This begs the question of whether 'responsibility to the reader' is sometimes a code for expanding the commercial market for a literary novel – creating the 'sweetspot' novel – by editorial practices that seek to flatten out the extremes of the 'aesthetic gap' between Jauss's horizons of expectation and change. The interviews suggest that a consideration of the reader's response is a key element of 'attuned' reading, and if editors are fulfilling this function well then it is likely to have a positive effect on the sales of the book. This, of course, does not mean that they are doing it in order to sell more copies, but this is complex terrain in the navigation between autonomy and heteronomy. Malik (2008:729) notes that: '[b]uilt into "the literary" as a category is the axiom that the literary text is highly individual, even unique—which, on the surface at least, is at odds with the patterns of textual resemblance on which marketing and promotions are conventionally dependent.' I see this as a tension for the major publishers especially: the Big Five and larger independents such as Bloomsbury and Faber. The offer made by small presses, with a more limited output is somewhat different: Colby, Marczewska and Wilson (forthcoming) note that editorial practices assumed to have disappeared in the mainstream have become effectively their mode of marketing, with editors seen as taste-making figures and considerable overlap between their writers and readers. We saw in Chapter Five, Oneworld's commitment to producing distinctive global novels, and Alma's mission to 'keep the [literary] flame alive'. It might be argued that the development of contemporary literary fiction demands a habitus-shifting independent sector, with imprints whose literary identity is bound up with novelty and diversity. It is worth noting that some novels that

meet O'Gorman and Eaglestone's criteria of being 'free and unbound' are published initially by an independent, and if critical and commercial success follows, paperback rights sold on to a larger publisher, for example *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing* (McBride 2013) was initially published by Galley Beggar Press then, after success at the Baileys Prize, the Goldsmiths Prize and The Kerry Group Prize, in paperback by Faber & Faber.

The interviews reveal authors' commitment to the difficult search for new literary horizons, and a frustration with 'publishers [who] would like you to write the same book twelve times in a row' (Grimwood). Barney Norris described the struggle to maintain his artistic autonomy: not to be 'compromised by concessions I've made to someone else's voice'. He talked of his refusal, with his second novel, to accede to his publisher's demands to lighten the ending because he wanted an ending that took the reader to a 'new emotional place.' Even in his genre fiction, Grimwood talks of subversively slipping 'a mystical element no one has seen' past his editor at Penguin. There is certainly a concern among both authors, readers and prize judges that publishers' sense of editing for an audience akin to what Wayne Booth terms 'the public myth' may lead to compromise, especially with regard to literary endings, and that it is the work of the author – and perhaps also the small press – to shift such assumptions and push horizons of change.

Intellectual and Affective Engagement

Until recently, literary critical research on endings has tended to separate feeling and judgement. Narratology begins by stripping away situational concerns of the reading and writing of literature, in a search for its pure, underlying structure. Reader-response theory starts from a different principle as we found in Part One: Rosenblatt focused on the reader's 'aesthetic' stance towards the text as opposed to their 'efferent' stance; Holland explored the psychological dynamics of reader response, understanding responses to the text to be filtered through an identity theme. Indeed, it may be argued that one of the origins of reader-response theory is in literary critics' reluctance to turn aside from methodologies of critique to methodologies of appreciation.[62] But this literature has rarely looked at the ways in which particular narratological features shape both intellectual and affective responses to the text. We saw an exception in Phelan's work on rhetorical reader response which recognises the role played by the author in shaping intellectual, emotional,

[62] See Felski (2015) on the way in which literary critical discourse is shaped by a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' in Paul Ricoeur's term.

aesthetic and ethical responses to the text, but found limitations in his focus on the primacy of author agency and his sense that most readers read the same texts in the same way. In the last two decades there has been an emerging interrogation of the affective and phenomenological dimensions of literary response,[63] but its intersections with narrative theory are limited. Within feminist narrative theory, Warhol (2003) has written on affectivity and narrative structure, with a primary focus on popular forms aimed at female audiences and the ways in which they are constructed to produce familiar patterns of feelings. Turning to accounts from all three groups studied in this thesis is revelatory in the sense that there is no hesitation among most of the respondents in talking in one breath about the intellectual, emotional, psychological and ethical effects of ending. The writer Kevin Brophy makes the claim that 'writers read in distinctive ways and for purposes not foregrounded by cultural theorists, literary critics or historians. This distinctive way of reading has to do with superimposing the sensual and the intellectual.'(2003:3). I would extend this claim to say that members of the literary industry and everyday readers seek modes of reading that combine critical appreciation and emotional engagement, and this is reflected in their discourse. Among all three groups studied there was a sense that endings are a site where intellectual and affective responses to the novel collide and intermingle. Novels are discussed in experiential terms, and where that experience is analysed it is in terms of the conjunction of effects that it aims to produce. This is evident, for example in Lucy Luck's definition of the term 'landing': 'you can finish it, and with a sigh, you're not expecting anything else. There's no loose ends' and in Menmuir's sense of writing an ending that the reader sees as an intellectual puzzle but that also makes them enter into the process of grief that his book explores. Though the best novels are seen to be both intellectually and emotionally engaging, there is not necessarily an expectation that novels will *resolve* on both levels: Grimwood, for example, noted that three of his SF endings made him cry, while the ending of his literary novel offered intellectual satisfaction. Nonetheless, the novels that were most widely admired across the groups: *Wolf Hall* or *Lincoln in the Bardo* for example, seemed to be those in which the reader felt the emotional power but it was clear that it was scaffolded by a careful intellectual structure.

The relationship between intellectual and emotional forms of resolution in the novel may partly derive from the author's negotiation of instinct and craft discussed above. For example, it is clear that some novelists (e.g. Fuller, Carthew) write through the emotional

[63] e.g. Feagin (1996)

trajectory of the narrative, effectively 'feeling their way' to an ending before working back from that ending to ensure that the intellectual structure is robust; others more consciously construct the structural dynamic with a sense of the reader's response in mind. Robertson discussed endings in two parts – the consummation of the action which she calls 'the full-blooded roar of an event' and then 'gently letting the reader go out into the world afterwards, letting everything settle' and 'answering all the unanswered questions'. For Mick Jackson, his early novels followed a model of 'chaos, calamities and obstacles – and then this epiphany – bang!' before 'a sort of peacefulness enter[s] the novel'. While the structure suggested by both writers resembles the trajectory Phelan (2007) outlines from *closure/exposition* to *arrival*, and then *farewell* and *completion*, Phelan's account does not account for the way in which the text influences the reader's emotions. In the writers' accounts, we find a sense of the emotional trajectory of the reader's response. They emphasise the shift in mood from climax to denouement and also the shift in pace that is a common feature of the reading experience at the end of the novel. Theirs is a narrative language that manages to encompass the poetics of endings: including features such as musicality and rhythm; readerly dynamics, including the reader's affective and visceral responses to the text; and the influence of both on the changes of pace of reading at the end of the novel. Throughout the research respondents reported on the effects of the aesthetic and narrative choices that help to embed such affective and intellectual engagements. I would suggest that three aesthetic features are primarily contributors to the reader's affective response, while four features of narrative contribute to their intellectual response. For the former we have:

a. The musicality of endings:

Authors talked of needing to find the rhythm of a book, of the dying fall and of the tone of departure. One publisher suggested parallels between the conclusion of a novel and the end of a symphony, noting that editorial work on the ending was often about 'taking another breath' or 'adding a beat' to ensure that the rhythm of the novel matched its emotional intent. One of the reading groups discussed the idea of the musical coda as an analogy for a satisfactory style of resolution for the novel. The music of the ending was also seen as an integral part of the concept of 'landing' (a form of resolution that incorporates affective, intellectual and aesthetic elements to which I will return).

b. The journey's end

It is a familiar trope of fiction to represent emotional journeys in spatial terms and this relationship can be reflected in a desire for the ending to provide 'geographic' resolution. Jackson talked of the importance of setting in building narrative. Carthew's novels follow the trajectory of a journey through landscape to a desired ending point, while the circular form of Norris's *Five Rivers Met on a Wooded Plain* features Salisbury as 'almost a character in the novel', which opens and concludes with a bird's eye view of the city. Menmuir's *The Many* is built around a vividly-drawn sense of place, which begins to crack as the disruptive ending is signalled. Agents and publishers talked about the figurative journey of the novel: for Bryony Woods it is important that readers do not find themselves 'stranded in the middle of a moor' at the novel's end. For readers, setting is frequently mentioned and is sometimes so vividly drawn that it compensates for structural omissions. The idea of the journey's end is closely connected to the notion of responsibility to the reader and with the notion of landing – it is a means of keeping the novel grounded. In the critical literature, the geography of the novel is one of Phelan's 'signs of closure' – which he suggests may include the return of the protagonist to the place where the action commenced. However, the geography of the novel is primarily discussed here as a feature of the textual dynamics of the novel rather than as part of the readerly dynamics (which would include the reader's affective, aesthetic and ethical response).

c. The last line or final image

Grimwood talked of 'the last thing that remains, whether it is a colour, or a mood, or a note', suggesting the privileged position of the last image as the thing that the reader takes away with them from the text. Laura Williams understood the power of 'a beautiful line or a beautiful image' as triggering an essential moment of reflection at the ending. Sometimes a final image is, like a return to place, a way of symbolically returning to the beginning of the novel, as with Fuller's paper bag blowing along the beach in *Swimming Lessons*. These observations recall Rabinowitz's argument about the 'stressed features' of a text. He suggests that the function of conclusions is to provide a point of vantage which enables the reader to make sense of the unresolved strands of narrative: to 'scaffold our retrospective interpretation of the book' (1987:62).

Regarding intellectual engagements, we can highlight four features from the research:

a. The thread that draws you through

One of the reading groups expressed their impatience with *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, arguing that it was almost impossible to navigate the convoluted threads of the narrative. A central challenge for authors and publishers was expressed by Lucy Luck in commenting on the difference between editing short stories and novels. The latter has 'more moving parts. There are more overlaps, there are more characters, there's more time. It is a question of being able to complete the narrative arc with all the characters completing it together.' Within the complex narrative structures that all three groups admired in literary fiction, agents and editors focused on the need to find a thread that could draw the reader through the narrative. In trying to resolve the ending of Zoe Gilbert's novel *Folk*, Luck advised the author to emphasize the trajectory of one of the characters and to create a circularity from the beginning to the end of the book. Mick Jackson expressed the challenge in a typically colourful metaphor: 'Right, I've got all this great fan of wires, how the fuck do I put it back together without shutting down the entire telephone network of North London?' The reader's intellectual engagement with the novel, and indeed their judgement of the ending, is linked to the skilful navigation of narrative complexity and close focus. This relates to Kermode's contention that all fiction is ultimately about sense-making.

b. Destabilising endings

Conversely, endings that make explicit cognitive demands of the reader contribute to intellectual engagement. This may be in the form of a endings that 'pull the rug out from under you', forcing a transformation in perspective. Wyl Menmuir talked about his intentions with the ending of *The Many*: 'I felt that by leaving so many things unanswered you'd get to the end and go "Oh, why? Why have you done that to me?" and have to work that through.' Menmuir's intention was that the ending of the book would force a second reading at slower pace. This is a similar effect to that described by Boxall as central to Ian McEwan's *Atonement*. Boxall argues that the ending 'bends the historical light in the novel and complicates the texture of the novel's realism.' It 'demands that we undertake a second reading, in which we become conscious at all times of a double focus, and of contradictory drives running through the novel.' (2013:67). Both novels and their endings are discussed further in Chapter Nine. However, changes in perspective at the end of a novel may be much more subtle. Mabey noted that as an editor 'I like […]books where the author is puzzling out something and often then surprising you at the end with their – not

necessarily a big reveal – but it transmigrates into something different. It's the intellectualism that I find appealing in fiction.'

c. Ethical resolution

One of the reading groups described their satisfaction with the ending of Ng's *Little Fires Everywhere* as 'a sense that in the end the right kind of truth came out and fairness prevailed, even if it was destructive for some involved.' Another group noted that what they sought in endings was 'an ending that reveals the purpose of the book', for example in 'telling us something important about society'. Sam Baker described the effects of the ending of Alderman's *The Power* in this way: 'It taps in to what lots of people are thinking and talking about. […] It was saying something about the extraordinary situation in which women find themselves right now, which nobody could have predicted even a year ago.' Barney Norris described a conception of the novel as a bell that 'peals true'. It suggests that ethical and aesthetic elements work in conjunction to achieve their effects on the reader.

My analysis here has something in common with Booth's identification in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961) of three ways in which readers seek clarification in any text: intellectual, qualitative and practical. For Booth intellectual clarification is concerned with a search for the truth – this equates with my idea of ethical satisfaction (though, as we see above I identify two more ways in which novels elicit intellectual engagement). Booth's conception of qualitative clarification is the desire for aesthetic satisfaction, which is discussed above with regard to affective engagement. His understanding of practical clarification is a human desire to seek satisfaction in terms of the outcomes for the characters. I understand this as psychological satisfaction, which I see as an integral part of the idea of responsibility to the reader, which we now go on to discuss.

Endings as Meeting Point Between Writer and Reader

A sense of the ending as a point at which the writer and reader meet – sometimes in direct address and sometimes more obliquely – is expressed across the literary-historical and critical sources we examined in Part One and is raised by research participants across all of the three groups. Phelan's readerly dynamics include the idea of 'farewell' – the concluding exchanges between the implied author, the narrator and the reader, and 'completion' which is the conclusion of the reader's ethical and aesthetic judgement of the text (Phelan

2007). Working at a more structural level, Torgovnick (1981) suggests that the relationship between the author and reader at the end of the novel may be complementary, incongruent or confrontational. Of the authors interviewed, Carthew talked explicitly of her contract with the reader, who needs to be able to say 'Yes, you haven't lied to me this whole way'. For Menmuir, the effects of the ambiguous, destabilising ending of *The Many* rely on a relationship of responsibility to both his source material and his imagined, ideal reader. He described the decision to ignore the critique of professional readers who pointed to the complexity for readers of holding two conflicting narratives in their heads simultaneously, arguing that 'I think I can find a reader who will relish that, who will want that sort of relationship.' Nonetheless Menmuir was concerned to underpin his relationship with the reader with realist effects, for example, vivid and carefully researched depictions of place. The agents and publishers interviewed noted visceral reactions to books that they felt might be seen to 'cheat' readers, and the suggestion that authors might need to give the reader 'just a little bit more' or 'some sense of hope' were a frequent subject of negotiation between 'attuned' professional readers and creatively ambitious writer (who often, like Menmuir and Norris, resisted such calls completely or made only very minor adjustments – it is, as Norris pointed out, the author's name on the cover of the book). There was also a resistance to endings that are too clever, making a book 'feel like a literary enterprise'. From the reading groups we heard that endings should be in keeping with the book and not disrupt the reading experience; they should be authentic, believable and avoid leaving the reader in complete suspense.

Abbott notes two forms of closure in the relationship between author and reader: closure at the level of questions and closure at the level of expectations (2002:54–57). The interviews suggest that, with literary fiction at least, closure at the level of questions is not necessarily required, but that closure at the level of expectations (which may include an expectation of ambiguity or openness) is widely desired. Related to this is the idea of a form of readerly satisfaction that doesn't neatly fit with either the intellectual or affective engagements discussed above, and that is a sense of psychological satisfaction. This may include a sense, clearly identifiable in the research from reading groups, that the trajectory for the central characters is believable. One aspect of this was widely discussed in the interviews and that is the idea that the novel should create a world that (in the eyes of the reader) continues after the ending of the novel. Not all novels can do this of course: Menmuir's fictional world disintegrates at the end of *The Many*, as does Atkinson's in *A*

God in Ruins but there is a widespread desire among readers to imagine what happens next between characters, and authors (e.g. Fuller, Carthew) are frequently asked if they will consider writing sequels to stand-alone novels. Here we see D. A. Miller's idea of 'the narratable': all novels begin and end *in media res*; it is the author's job to define the terms of the narratable.

Another aspect of psychological satisfaction may be to see the novel as a response to the reader's own psychological needs. We saw in Part One that Kermode expresses this in universal terms: narrative is a response to *our* desire to make sense of our existence within the structure of time and to seek out *pleroma*. Holland was more interested in the psychological dynamics of the text at an individual level, which he understood to be filtered through the reader's 'identity theme'. Several of the reading groups suggested a desire to make sense of what they read in terms of their own lives and experiences.

A sense of what is owed to the reader at the ending of the novel, comes together in the concept of landing, discussed in both the author and literary industry chapters. Landing calls for a balancing of the different forms of intellectual, affective and psychological engagement. It was defined with most precision by Lucy Luck who explained that 'you've got to a point where whatever issue is being explored within that story has come to a natural conclusion and that you are able to leave the characters to go on and do whatever they need to do. […] [I]t's kind of like a beat, it's in music, it's that beat that finishes a phrase.' Landing is a rich metaphor that picks up on several of the strands discussed above. It may be a geographical homecoming or it may be a journey that has ended somewhere completely new. It may be a smooth coming to earth or a crash landing, but you are not left suspended in the air. There is a musical element to it, but still the sense of a created world that remains, beyond your grasp.

Discourses of Practice

A particular point of interest in these interviews is the language used by novelists to describe their practice. Most of the critical lexicon discussed in the opening chapters does not appear. In its place are a whole raft of terms, creating a rich and expressive creative vocabulary which, as we have seen does occasionally map on to established critical concepts, though is more often is subtly different and sometimes completely distinctive.

Examples include ‘the full-blooded roar of an event’ and the ‘letting your reader out into the world’, the notion of ‘a bell pealing true’ and the ‘tractor-beam’ of knowing where you are going, of the end of a novel as a symphony which should attract applause or of the Coda that completes it, the ‘dissipation ending’ and the image of the threads of the plot as a fan of wires. We find a concentration on elements that seem to be absent from the narratological literature including the idea of landing, the musicality of endings, the resonance of a last image or sentence, the focus on a ‘thread that draws you through’, a stress on the pace of reading up to the end, the ‘first reading’ and ‘second reading’ quality of the novel, and perhaps, underlying it all the sense of responsibility to the reader that Parker and Binder (1978) relegated to the nineteenth century. In *The Limits of Critique* Felski (2015) looks beyond the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ that underlies academic practices of literary interpretation. She posits instead a form of post-critical reading in which literary scholars should place themselves ‘in front of’ the text rather than behind it, reflecting on what it suggests and makes possible. My suggestion is that drawing on a practice-derived vocabulary that combines intellectual, affective, visceral and ‘reader-attuned’ responses may be one way of doing this.

PART THREE: READING ENDINGS

Chapter Eight – Analysing an Ending: A God in Ruins by Kate Atkinson

In this chapter I look in detail at the ending of a single novel, drawing first on the narratological tools outlined in Part One and second on the concepts emerging from the empirical research presented in Part Two. I have selected Kate Atkinson's 2015 novel *A God in Ruins* (2015) as a novel that relates to a number of the considerations arising from the empirical chapters. Atkinson's work clearly falls into the category described by the literary industry as 'sweetspot' fiction in that it is reliably both best-selling and prize-winning. In 2014, the paperback edition of Atkinson's *Life after Life* (2013) outsold every other adult novel in the UK with the exception of Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl* and Dan Brown's *Inferno* (Walton 2015). Three of Atkinson's novels have won Whitbread/Costa book awards[64] and a fourth, *Transcription* (2018) was shortlisted for The British Book Awards in 2019, though, as McDowell (2015) notes, Atkinson has tended to be ignored by the more 'intellectual literary awards' like the Booker and the Folio prizes. As with the more consciously literary of the book awards, so with critical attention: Atkinson's work is widely reviewed, but not widely studied in the academy.[65] This may be because Atkinson is thought of as a genre writer (with her *Case Histories* series featuring detective Jackson Brodie) or because she is bracketed as a 'middlebrow' novelist, known for her commitment to 'the old-school virtues of plot, character and perfectly paced, emotionally charged storytelling' (Walton 2015), though in fact both her crime fiction and her literary fiction have been explicitly experimental in form from the start of her writing career. The ending of *A God in Ruins* produced mixed reactions in the empirical research. It was greatly admired by one of the literary prize judges, a book group that read it noted only that the novel 'carr[ies] you along so anomalies [with *Life after Life*] do not worry the reader', while one of the literary industry respondents described Atkinson as 'a genius' but confessed that she had been so jolted by the ending that she read the reviews on *Good Reads* to see what response it had engendered from readers. This may have been a concern about whether the ending, which my interviewee described as one that 'pull[s] the rug out from under you', strains the implied compact between author and reader. A final reason for considering this novel was

[64] Atkinson won the Whitbread First Novel and Book of the Year Awards for *Behind the Scenes at a Museum* in 1995 and the Costa Novel Prize for *Life after Life* in 2013 and *A God in Ruins* in 2015.
[65] There are a handful of journal articles on individual novels but to date only one scholarly overview of her work: Norquay (2017). A forthcoming book by Armelle Parey for the Contemporary British Novelists series published by Manchester University Press is underway.

that Atkinson has drawn attention in interviews to the particular importance of endings in her fiction and has made clear her particular attachment to the ending of *A God in Ruins:*

> I tend to get emotional towards the end of writing a book, because so much is coming together and the story feels as though it is going to work and do what I wanted it to do. I love endings – beginnings and endings are what I like most in fiction. The end of *A God in Ruins* for me, was the most meaningful and powerful of all the books I've written. (Atkinson n.d.)

A God in Ruins is described by the author as a 'companion piece' to her earlier novel: *Life after Life.* It takes up the story of one of the supporting characters of the first novel, the protagonist Ursula's brother Teddy, a Second World War bomber pilot. In doing so the 'horizon of expectation' for *A God in Ruins* is conditioned by the earlier novel, which is formally inventive, recounting many versions of a single life with repeated premature endings. In one of the early chapters Ursula is born and dies immediately, in the following chapter she survives to age five and then drowns in an accident at the beach. There is the repeated closural sentence 'Darkness fell' in early chapters, opening out to new (and less terminal) variations in later chapters. Particular events (which we may understand as Rabinowitz's 'rules of notice') reoccur throughout the narrative though they may be experienced by different characters and they trigger varied outcomes. There is the sense of a life struggling towards perfectibility, or greater meaning in the world, or simply more openness: a Jamesian 'sense of the life still going on' (Conrad 1921). This then, is a novel that moves from the suggestion of closed form to a much more open form: we meet the Todd family *in media res* and we understand there is not only one narratable version of the story, but many.

In the penultimate chapter of *Life after Life* Ursula's brother Teddy is resurrected from his earlier death in a bombing mission and returns to London. *A God in Ruins* takes up this final version of Teddy's story in which he survives to build a life, marry, have children and eventually die in old age. On the surface the novel has a more conventional structure than *Life after Life*: chronologically it spans Teddy's early boyhood from 1925 to his deathbed in 2012, but the temporal structure of its narrative is far from linear; it jumps from period to period between and within chapters; and there are regular instances of both *analepsis* and *prolepsis,* even within single sentences, as stories of particular characters or objects are recounted in their entirety. The use of prolepsis within a novel may often contribute, as

Currie (2007)[66] argues, to an 'anticipation of retrospection': a sense that the narrative is tending towards a future vantage point from which to make sense of what has happened. But in the postwar sections of *A God in Ruins* the reader is struck by what appears to be a deliberate attempt to still the narrative momentum, with key plot points revealed out of turn, sometimes many chapters in advance. Abbott (2008:53) notes the vital role of suspense and surprise in giving life to narrative: 'All successful narratives of any length are chains of suspense and surprise that keep us in a fluctuating state of impatience, wonderment, and partial gratification […] until the final moment of closure.' He suggests that 'the key to suspense is the possibility, at least, that things could turn out differently. And surprise, which is such a common feature of successful narrative, is what happens when, to a degree, things do turn out differently.' In *A God in Ruins* Atkinson follows what might seem to be the much riskier strategy, in terms of reader engagement, of withholding suspense in large sections of the novel, in order to augment the surprise of the ending. With the repeated closure of (what usually turn out to be minor) story elements throughout the novel, the possibility that things might turn out differently is held in abeyance. This is not to deny the author's frequent use of the conditional tense throughout the book. Alternative imagined lives are offered, but in the postwar sections, these are often lives that are duller than the 'real' life of the narrative. Teddy conjures an alternative future for Nancy: 'She would strain her eyes to knit and do the *Telegraph* crossword. […] They would be good companions and they would fade quietly away together.' (2015:301).

In the postwar sections of the novel, present and future are compressed, seeming to occur simultaneously, though the mood is always retrospective. In contrast to these quotidian chapters with their melding of past, future and imagined time are the vivid, action-packed chapters recounting Teddy's night missions over Germany. Though also narrated in the past tense, these passages are paradoxically the perpetual present of the novel. Of Teddy's wartime mode of being we learn:

> He didn't make plans himself any more. There was now and it was followed by another now. If you were lucky. ('What a fine Buddhist monk you would make' Ursula said). (2015:193).

It is a present that is visceral, comic, rich in dialogue, full of terror and wonder (the bomber crews are awed by night vistas over the Alps, despite their destructive mission and the

[66] The phrase comes from Brooks (1984) but is fleshed out by Currie through engagements with Heidegger and Derrida.

constant danger).The war chapters also contain imagined, conditional-tense futures, but they are very different from the dull imaginings of the postwar segments; there is a sense of a heightened life even in the imagination. In one such episode Teddy is conducting an affair in the empty house of a lover's wealthy family:

> He lifted the veil on a small Rembrandt every time he passed it on the staircase. No one would miss it. […] If he took the Rembrandt his life would be quite different. He would be a thief, for one thing. A different narrative.

We are told that the events of the war and its immediate aftermath occurred at a time 'when people still believed in the dependable nature of time – a past, a present, a future – the tenses that Western civilization was constructed on' (2015:73). The novel is shot through with nostalgia for the lost certainties of this past time and its confident sense of temporal order. The narrative of Teddy's later life in Yorkshire with Nancy and their daughter Viola is (in a Kermodean sense) an attempt to make sense of the shape of a life in relation to time but also to make sense of time itself in a post-cataclysmic present that was never imagined.

The novel's jumps in time are echoed by shifts in focalisation. The narrative perspective shifts seamlessly from Teddy, to Nancy, to their daughter Viola and to her daughter Bertie, interspersed with passages (or sometimes simply asides) of omniscient narration in which events in the far-future can be recounted. A mid-chapter shift of focalisation is often used to signify heightened moments, exemplifying Rabinowitz's 'rules of notice' (1996). While Teddy's 'eternal present' is the aerial bombardment of Germany, the cataclysmic event for Teddy's daughter Viola is the secret trauma of witnessing the death of her mother Nancy. This event closes a chapter focalised from Nancy's perspective following her diagnosis of a brain tumour; as she fades out of consciousness, we see the scene repeated from Teddy's perspective, making clear that he has acceded to Nancy's request to administer morphine in the final moments. In one short and devastating paragraph the focalisation of the scene skips to Viola, who has slipped out of bed at just the wrong moment, witnessing her desperate father's attempts to smother his suffering wife with a pillow. A shift to Bertie's perspective thirty pages before the end of the novel, marks a clear break in both narrative and mood and a decisive move towards the final denouement: we see the next generation taking over, the novel's pace enters a gallop as multiple threads are brought together and simultaneously the world of the novel beginning to crack with intertextual fragments invading the primary narrative.

In contrast to *Life after Life* in which the narrative trajectory is towards increasing openness (at least until the very final chapter, which circles back tantalisingly to the beginning), *A God in Ruins* seems to be on a more conventional trajectory to both completeness and closure. The narrative consistently tends towards completeness in the sense that stories are taken through to their conclusions though prolepsis and loose threads are tied up (sometimes repeatedly – we hear more than once of Hannah's terrible ending and the future life of her emerald necklace). In the final chapters of the novel we are present at Teddy's deathbed and we witness the monstrous Viola's partial redemption while Bertie and Sunny's chaotic lives are domesticated, with unanticipated rapidity, by marriage and babies. But completeness and closure are unexpectedly at odds in this novel. The closure offered by Atkinson is a radically destabilising instance of what Richardson (2001) has termed 'denarration', shattering the conventional completeness that has been held out to the reader. Richardson describes denarration as 'narrative negation in which a narrator denies significant aspects of her narrative that had earlier been represented as given' suggesting that it is a narrative feature that 'can fundamentally alter the nature and reception of the story' and that 'to many readers it can be quite disconcerting'(2001:168). In the case of *A God in Ruins* the effect is heightened because it is the author – or at least, in Booth's terms, the implied author – rather than the narrator who denarrates. Teddy's final moments of consciousness in his bed in the nursing home are refocalised as the final experiences of fighter-pilot Teddy in his burning Halifax. It becomes clear that the entire postwar narrative has been, effectively, in the conditional tense. In the final pages of the chapter Atkinson tears down the five walls of her house of fiction one by one and her characters and their stories disintegrate. This is an ending that in one sense follows the rubric suggested by Mortimer (1985) for the modern novel in problematising closure and transforming art into its own finality; the paratextual 'Note from the Author' suggests such serious intent – 'it's about fiction (and how we must imagine what we cannot know) and the Fall (of Man). From grace.' (2015:387) – but Atkinson's perpetually playful intertextuality works to underline the performative nature of the enterprise and to undermine confidence in the coherence of any such fictional representation. The distant past at Fox Corner is strongly suggestive of *Howard's End,* while Teddy's literary motifs are the Romantic and Georgian poets and Shakespeare: there is a nostalgia for a 'lost England' in all of them. But the allusions are fragmentary and confused and in the final chapters of the novel a poetic ragbag from Teddy's memory begins to invade the primary narrative:

Bertie drowns out a terrible seminar on marketing innovation by replaying fragments of Frost, Housman and Hopkins in her head as she explains to her mother 'you may not know this but the universe has already started collapsing. There are signs everywhere.' (2015:362). This invasion of the primary text by intertextual allusions recalls Rabinowitz's concept of 'rules of rupture' as textual features that disrupt the continuity of a work, releasing the reader into an intertextual space of counternarratives and emergent discourses. It is a sign that the fiction we have entered is inadequate to the task of telling the real story. Both the final, dramatic narrative fragmentation of the original narrative and the contrastingly elegiac coda, in which his wife and sister mourn the 'real' death of Teddy in 1947, are scored with allusions to *The Tempest*: Atkinson casting herself as a kind of Prospero, who has conjured revels but has now abdicated her magic and is asking for her audience's indulgence, while Ursula imagines that 'of his bones are coral made'. Already, we have noted at least four endings to *A God in Ruins*, which it may be helpful to consider in terms of Phelan's (1989a, 2007) textual and readerly dynamics of narrative progression, outlined in Part One. First the threads of the foregrounded story – the family plot – are tied up. In terms of textual dynamics, this section offers what seems to be a conventional move towards 'exposition/closure' in that we are given information about the action and the characters that includes 'signs of completeness' and readers may understand these as 'signs of closure'. Second, that plot is undermined and fragmented though the intervention of the (implied) author with an invasion of fragmentary counternarratives and an invocation of the many ghosts whose stories have not been told. Here it becomes clear that the signs of completeness in the preceding section are far from signs of closure. We enter a space of dialogue between the textual dynamics and readerly dynamics of narrative, but this is neither Phelan's 'arrival' (the resolution of the instabilities and tensions of the plot) nor his 'farewell' *(*the concluding exchanges between the implied author, narrator and reader which can affect reader's response to the narrative). It contains elements of both but what is more evident here is what Reising (1996) terms 'non-closure', a rejection of the closure the narrative has been tending towards and the emergence of a shadow narrative that has been running alongside the dominant storyline, that fiction has to fill in the gaps created by tragedy. The third 'ending' of *A God in Ruins* is the return to the moment of Teddy's actual death in F-Fox over the North Sea, an episode we recognise as the scene that should have followed the very first chapter of the novel. In Phelan's terms this is a second instance of exposition/closure, this time of the revealed shadow plot. Fourth, we see Teddy mourned by his family in the immediate postwar period; this may be described

as the final 'arrival' of the plot, with the image of an ascending skylark taking us back to what is chronologically the first scene of the novel, set in 1925. However, none of these forms of completeness or closure coincide with the actual ending of the book. The fifth ending is a reprisal of *The Adventures of Augustus*, a caricature of Teddy[67] invented by his Aunt Izzie for a series of children's books. From the very beginning of the novel it is clear that Teddy abhors having his life 'stolen' by fiction and is deeply resistant to the idea that he may have anything in common with Augustus. Atkinson's tongue-in-cheek comment is that 'when all else is gone, Art remains. Even Augustus.' (2015:376). So we move from a vision of the implied author as Prospero conjuring a world and a second, tragic ending for the novel in which Teddy along with countless others do not survive and the survivors are left to try and make sense of their loss, to the observation that any novelist's attempt to give voice to a single life, still less many lives, may be as ridiculous a fiction as the story of Augustus. This ending may be understood as the 'farewell' in Phelan's terms. Though it constitutes the ending of the fictional text, as a published work, *A God in Ruins* ends with a paratextual 'Author's Note', a direct address from author to reader, in which Atkinson explains why the book is written as it is. If we understand the author figure of Ending 2 (the disintegration ending) as the implied author, we might see the author figure of this paratextual ending as, in Booth's terms: 'the flesh-and-blood author who tells many stories before and after this one' (Booth [1961]1983:428). Atkinson as flesh-and-blood author justifies the novel's dramatic *volte-face* in terms of her general philosophy of fiction and gives her account of the central themes and aesthetic choices of the novel. Though Phelan does not incorporate the role of an author's postscript in his account of readerly dynamics, it may here be understood in terms of Phelan's concept of completion, which he defines as the conclusion of the reader's evolving response to the narrative including ethical and aesthetic judgements. Phelan's argument is that the power of fiction derives from the role played by author agency in shaping readers' intellectual, affective and ethical responses and here Atkinson is clearly exercising her authorial agency.

On one level then, this is a story that emerges from resistance to closure. In terms of Miller's concepts of the 'narratable' and 'non-narratable' (1981), it seeks the narratable beyond the limits of the life that it is narrating; it might be said that Atkinson challenges herself to create a narrative out of what other novelists overlook as, in Miller's term the 'quiescence' bordering the narratable. Teddy promises himself that should he survive the

[67] Another intertextual element since Augustus is closely modelled on Richmal Crompton's *Just William* books.

war he will 'try to […] live a good quiet life' and it is this very deliberately unambitious life that the novel records. The novelist's *modus operandi* is the temporal disruption and conditional tense interjection we have earlier noted, enabling her to piece together an unbounded form of the narratable from forays into the past, the future and the might-have-been. But we also have an author who is committed to and seemingly fascinated by the closure she spends so long resisting – so much so that the novel has, as we have seen, (at least) six endings, including the paratextual address from author to reader.

In its recognition of both reader and textual dynamics, Phelan's rhetorical account of narrative seems to offer a more useful set of descriptors for Atkinson's multiple endings than, for example, Torgovnick's typology of endings. We find elements of both Torgovnick's scenic ending (for example in Ursula and Nancy's final conversation) and epilogue (for example in the account of Nancy's alternative future and Bertie and Sunny's partners who will never meet them) in the novel. In terms of Togovnick's authorial and readerly viewpoint, we see the ending of the novel both in close-up (e.g. Teddy's final moments in the nursing home and in F-Fox) and in overview (e.g. the cracks appearing in the palace of fiction). It is difficult to ascribe a particular 'shape' to Atkinson's multiple endings in terms of Torgovnick's typology. The novel's ending is 'tangential' but it is not 'open'; it contains clear elements both of 'circularity' (it opens and closes with accounts of Teddy's last flight, a soaring skylark and Izzie's *Adventures of Augustus*) and 'parallelism' (the ghosts of the war are foreshadowed when Teddy laments Izzie's silencing of a lark and the generations of birds that would never sing).

However, one notable feature of the novel's multiple endings is that they bring to the fore the female narratives of the novel, which gain significance as Teddy's history is revealed as a construct. Dee (2018) has argued that Atkinson's is a 'profoundly feminist project'; 'all of Atkinson's work has ultimately been about [. . .] rescuing women's lives and labor, both past and present, from literary invisibility.' At one level, *A God in Ruins* follows a conventional masculine plot. Its male protagonist fights a brave war, bonds with his crew, has romantic adventures while on leave and dies a hero, or alternatively survives to marry, reproduce and take responsibility for the next generation. But the final figures at the ending are all women: the resolutely competent and supportive Bertie at her grandfather's deathbed, the difficult Viola partially redeemed in the revelation of her secret knowledge of her mother's death and her mission to find her son, Ursula and Nancy, the survivors of a

masculine war finding hope in the vision of an ascending skylark, Aunt Izzie, whose literary work is the last memorial to Teddy, and finally Kate Atkinson, as Prospero, conjuring the storyworld. In terms of feminist narratology then, we may consider the ending of the novel as resistance to a conventional, linear narrative structured, as Roof (1996) suggests that the 'reproductive aegis' of the male plot so often is, by familiar expectations of victory, self-knowledge or death (there is death but it turns out this has occurred seventy years in the past) and the reclaiming of a female plot emphasising continuing life, stories both told and untold, female friendship and the natural world.

We can see from the above that narrative theory enables some potentially productive readings of *A God in Ruins*. The question I now turn to is what can be added through a consideration of the discourses of practice I outlined in Chapter Seven. I suggested that a consideration of such discourses point to the properties of endings of sites of convergence, meeting points of art and craft, of affective and intellectual engagement with the text and as a meeting place and of writer and reader. I posited a consideration of a mode of reading distinct from the response of 'ordinary readers' on the one hand and literary critics on the other in which the experiential qualities of the text – how fast is the reader turning the pages?; does the ending make the hairs at the back of their neck stand up or does it make them want to throw the book across the room? – are considered by the 'attuned' professional reader, alongside more standard critical considerations such as lexical choice and the resolution of instabilities of plot. How do all these elements contribute to the way in which the book 'lands' and the way in which it fulfils its contract with the reader. How do they relate to considerations of genre?

Writers described the possible trajectory of an ending in terms of the 'full blooded roar of an event', 'an epiphany – bang!' and a 'letting everything settle' in which 'a sort of peacefulness enter[s] the novel', or alternatively an ending in which the characters have landed, but are continuing, or 'a Colm Toíbín dissipation ending'. They also referred to the power of a beautiful final sentence or closing image. A variety of ending effects were suggested including the ending that takes you to 'a new emotional place', 'the bell that peals true', the ending of a journey, the idea of a slowing down towards the end and the feeling that you 'almost have to read twice.' Literary industry interviewees spoke of the importance of 'landing' in affective and aesthetic terms as 'a natural conclusion' and 'the beat that finishes a phrase' but also a sense that 'the world that has been created will go on.' Reading groups offered a range of interpretations of the location of endings including

the last chapter, the end of the story or the end for the characters, the furthest point forward chronologically, bringing the book back full circle and the very last line of the book. They suggest a range of desired effects including an ending that makes you think, an ending in which loose ends are tied up, an ending you can believe in and an ending that reveals the purpose of the book.

Though Atkinson's ending takes place over three chapters rather than one (four if you include the chapter from Bertie's perspective that sets everything in motion) it is notable how many of the criteria above are fulfilled in the ending to *A God in Ruins*. Of the three closural chapters, the first, long chapter includes the 'full blooded roar of an event' with the final moments of Teddy's life as a pilot, and the 'epiphany – bang!' concerning the performative aspect of the novel's world-making. This is followed by two short chapters: a 'letting everything settle' chapter in which Nancy and Ursula mourn their loss followed by a coda offering an ironic comment on the resilience and the limitations of fiction. In following the denouement with two chapters, Atkinson seems to be separating the affective and intellectual resolutions she offers to the reader. The last pages of the novel take us both to the end of the story and to the ending for the characters. Details of Viola's life story and that of her children tumble out in the final pages of the novel, bringing an unexpected forward momentum and demanding that the reading picks up pace – but there is also a growing sense of performativity: that this is story told rather than action shown. Characters are given the opportunity to live their ideal life: Viola wants to 'learn to love', and miraculously she steps out of her life and flies to meet Sunny, who has found himself on a beach in Bali, where he has become a respected yoga teacher, while his sister Bertie, desperate for children at thirty-seven, suddenly meets her life partner on Waterloo Bridge. We do indeed reach the last point of the novel chronologically and also the furthest point geographically, with Sunny and Viola in Bali and his pregnant girlfriend in Australia, setting the scene for Atkinson's 'opening out' to the universal resonance of Teddy's story at the end of the chapter. In the next short chapter, in contrast, we move from the universal to the specific and local – a geographic home-coming in that the narrative returns to the country lane at Fox Corner where Teddy walked with Izzie twenty-two years earlier and there are still skylarks overhead.

The idea of 'landing' raises pertinent questions with regard to this novel. Helen Garnons-Williams' surprise at the way Atkinson chooses to end it may be rooted in a concern that,

with the storyworld in ruins, the emotional landing of the book must surely be compromised, since 'the world that has been created' cannot simply 'go on and be the world that has been created.' While that is true of the central 'thread that draws you through' this novel, Atkinson is a novelist who clearly enjoys tying up threads and (in a scene reminiscent of *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946)) she posits alternative futures for the narrative's survivors – down to the very minor characters – stressing the effects of his absence on future generations. The final scene between Nancy and Ursula at Fox Corner suggests a moving forward: the endurance of the compelling family history begun in *Life after Life*. There is a clear sense of aesthetic landing in the final chapters. If the tying up of threads has accelerated the reading pace of the novel, the way in which Atkinson writes Teddy's death and its aftermath slows it right down. We experience Teddy's last moments in a stretched out present-tense that brings us back to the strange peace and beauty of the night flights in F-Fox:

> A handful of heartbeats. That was what life was. A heartbeat followed by a heartbeat. A breath followed by a breath. One moment followed by another moment and then there was a last moment. Life was as fragile as a bird's heartbeat, fleeting as the bluebells in the wood. (2015:372)

The writing is rhythmic, poetic, visual, interspersed with song. The pacing suggests that Atkinson would wholly comprehend Helen Garnons-Williams' advice to her authors about playing the ending at more length and taking another beat (though we cannot, of course know what this section looked like in its first draft). The disintegration of the storyworld is interwoven with fragments of *The Tempest* as 'trumpets sound the end of revels' and 'the stuff that dreams are made of starts to rend and tear'. Birds rise into the air and fly away. Both *The Tempest* and the birds reappear in the final scene with Ursula and Nancy, allowing Atkinson a memorable series of final images including a soaring skylark that brings the novel back full circle to the bird Teddy observed with Izzie in the opening chapters. There is also a memorable not-quite-last line from Ursula: 'I believe we have just one life, and I believe that Teddy lived his perfectly' (2015:376): both a playful comment on *Life after Life* and a line drawn under both novels.

But, if Atkinson allows the book to 'land' aesthetically, in terms that we recognise from Lucy Luck's description, thematically it pulls in a different direction. The narrative is predicated precisely on a refusal to land. Atkinson keeps Teddy aloft for seventy years after his plane has crash landed in the sea and even in his final moment of consciousness, he is

carried away by Gerard Manley Hopkins' Holy Ghost with 'ah, bright wings'. His daughter, Viola, ends the novel making ready to fly, watching the dawn and listening to birdsong. There is an 'opening out' both geographically and historically at the end of the novel, from the 55,000 dead from Bomber Command, to the sixty million dead of the war, to the forty million of the Mongol conquests and the seven million of the Fall of Rome – all the other thousands of stories that were curtailed, that crashed to earth. In reclaiming Teddy's story, Atkinson is giving wings to these untold dead. Given her engagements with *Howard's End* in both *A God in Ruins* and *Life after Life* (in the postscript for the latter she acknowledges that she has 'the ghost of Forster always at my back') the opening out at the novel's end recalls Forster's 'Expansion. That is the idea the novelist must cling to. Not completion, not rounding off but opening out' (1927:116). Even after we know the truth of Teddy's story and Atkinson has pulled down her 'fifth wall' of fiction, we see the novel moving towards a landing and then suddenly taking flight again. As they mourn his death Ursula and Nancy imagine Teddy 'as free as the air' and Nancy suggests that he might have been reincarnated as a skylark. In a final chapter, Teddy is brought back to life again (with a nod to Ursula's numerous reincarnations in *Life after Life*) in *The Adventures of Augustus*, finally curtailed with the playful line (from Teddy to Ursula) 'But please stop reading now.' (2015:384). There is the sense of an ending that cannot allow itself to 'land' and an author who has to intervene to stop us reading. A resistance to landing is also evident in the imagery of the book. In her 'Author's Note', Atkinson draws attention to the constant 'rising and falling' in the novel but the dominant direction is always skyward. Flocks of birds rise throughout the book and indeed they are a paratextual element in the book's production with the image of a skylark raining down feathers is used by the UK publisher for the endpapers of the hardback edition. This resistance to landing may also be read as resistance to one of the familiar tropes of the male plot, the idea of the 'falling man' in narratives of trauma (prevalent, for example, in several 9/11 fictions).

In terms of the Waterstones readers' desired effects at the end of the novel, this is indubitably an ending that makes the reader think, an ending in which loose ends are tied up and an ending that reveals the purpose of the book. It also seems to be, in Barney Norris's term 'an ending that takes you to a new emotional place'. But perhaps the more interesting question is whether this is 'an ending you can believe in', in which 'the bell peals true'. The effects of the ending rely on a level of complicity between the assumed author and the assumed reader; readers on public reviewing sites are very divided on

whether they are prepared to be complicit. For some Atkinson's sleight of hand contributes to the emotional effect of the book, others are furious because it undermines it.

> The ending was a real surprise and I totally hated it.
> (Goodreads 2015a: *Antoinette*)

> How could you, Ms Atkinson! I LOVED the previous book. I loved the tracing of the alternatives, of 'the butterfly effect' problems. I LOVED Ursula and Teddy. How could you DO this?
> (Amazon 2016a: *J. Crowe*)

> The point of the book hit me like a blow from a sledgehammer. It made me cry. It made me feel like a complete fool. It left me in awe of Atkinson's brilliance. It made me want to read *Life After Life* again.
> (Goodreads 2015b: *Sharon*)

> I loved the ending, feeling like my heart and head were equally engaged.
> (Amazon 2016b: *Kitty Loves Books*)

Such violently contradictory reactions were no doubt anticipated both by the author and publisher. A commitment to the defamiliarisation of genre is, as Norquay argues, a central strategy across Atkinson's work: 'part of a strategic attempt to produce novels that can be pleasurable and meaningful yet disruptive in their challenges to our thinking about time, history, justice and love' (2017:119). Dee (2018) draws attention to the 'exceptional reader-friendliness' of Atkinson's work, but adds that 'it has always been a Trojan horse, a way of delivering something pointed in the guise of something smoothly familiar.' There are always going to be some readers who revel in the 'smoothly familiar' and are taken aback when the 'something pointed' appears. And there will always be readers who, like 'Kitty Loves Books' above, revel in an ending that is a meeting point of affective and intellectual engagement. What is notable however, is that whether they feel delighted or cheated, very few readers express anything other than complete surprise at the ending, despite numerous hints and clues in imagery, intertextuality and narrative technique throughout the novel, from the skylark silenced by Atkinson's literary avatar Izzie in the opening pages: 'all those beautiful songs that would never be sung' (2015:35) to the repeated use of the future conditional tense. A genetic study of early drafts would be required to ascertain how much work was required once the ending of the first draft was reached, in going back and integrating such hints and clues 'into the bloodstream' of the novel, or the extent to which Atkinson's agent and editor advised on the appropriate level of signposting. However, the interviews in Part Two suggest that the success of a complex

ending such as this one is dependent not just on a skilled writer and good editing but also on the success of both author and publisher both in projecting as 'first reader' – in working out how much or how little the reader needs to know to maintain the surprise of the ending, while ensuring that there is enough, in the bloodstream of the novel to make the ending feel justified.

In her 'Author's Note' Atkinson writes: ' I think that you can only be so mulishly fictive if you genuinely care about what you are writing.' (2015:388). Atkinson has a clear ethical commitment to fiction as a mode of sense-making in the face of calamity, but she also has a deep commitment to her central characters (Teddy, Ursula, Nancy, Izzie – arguably not so much the monstrous Viola) and a storyteller's sensibility. Even where the author is working to withhold suspense by drawing together past and future, there is always a page-turning quality to the novel, and if readers are turning pages with great speed, they are very likely to miss intimations in the imagery or the intertexts that all is not as it seems. On one level, then, in terms of responsibility to the reader, then, this may be a novel that, like Menmuir's *The Many*, you 'almost have to read twice' in order to appreciate. But will readers who have felt cheated at the end of a long novel ever volunteer to go back and start again? Will readers who have been emotionally devastated by the ending be up for a second round? What we get instead, is the 'Author's Note': a literal enactment of the idea of endings as a meeting point between writer and reader. Atkinson uses this forum to demonstrate her commitment to authenticity in the form of detailed research on the role of Bomber Command in the war effort, to define her fictional 'habitus' in terms of the history of the novel, assuring readers that her metafictional concerns do not preclude a commitment to 'traditional' storytelling, and also to draw attention to precisely those carefully spun threads that page-turning readers may have missed. The parallel plea for indulgence in the denouement chapter has an 'implied author' in the guise of Prospero drawing attention to the writer's *art*. Here we have an apparently 'flesh and blood author' drawing attention to the writer's *craft.* The ending becomes an explicit meeting point between the art and craft of the novelist.

It is notable that while Atkinson's postscript appeared in the first, hardback edition of *A God in Ruins* no such postscript appeared in the original hardback edition of *Life after Life*. It was added when the paperback edition was released a year later. There is no record of whether this was at the publisher's behest or whether it was the author' decision, but it suggests that both wanted to address the bewildered response from some of Atkinson's

readers.[68] Sam Baker argued that if you've read *Life after Life* you will realise from the beginning that *A God in Ruins* cannot possibly be a conventional life history: the author must have something up her sleeve.[69] What is the role of the publisher in defining the *horizon of expectation* for the reception of the book? If authors are interested, as Atkinson clearly is in her postscript, in communicating to readers the origin of the book, it is the job the publisher, in shaping the material form of the novel, to signal its destination. In the fiction industry, delineations of genre and readership are communicated through paratextual codes, clearly understood by publishers and booksellers though they tend to be absorbed subliminally by readers. These may include textual elements, for example the book blurb, endorsements or review quotes, reading group questions, notes on font and they may include design elements, for example jacket design, choice of typeface, layout, use of endpapers. Publishers rarely (though there are exceptions) address the reader directly in published editions of contemporary novels but proof copies sent in advance to reviewers and book bloggers do more regularly contain an introduction from the editor. These may all be seen as, in Genette's terms, elements of paratext. All of these elements frame the way in which the novel is intended to be read. In the hardback first edition of *A God in Ruins*, the earlier novel, *Life after Life* is cited above the author's name and the title of the new book; additionally copies were stickered with the paperback cover for the previous volume, noting its Costa Prize success. Critical reception of the previous book forms the bulk of the jacket copy on the back cover while the blurb on the inside flap begins by drawing attention to the innovative form of the previous novel. This is no doubt partly a signal to booksellers to look up the spectacular sales for the previous book and order accordingly, but it is also a clear attempt to define the *horizon of expectation* for the reception of the book – for reviewers and ordinary readers alike. Meanwhile the design elements set the mood for the new book. The front cover features a painting of a dead hare, hanging from a nail by a hind leg – referencing a silver hare given to Teddy as a good luck talisman by Ursula, which in the original narrative is passed down to Sunny who gives it to Viola as a token of their reconciliation ('for luck, for protection); while in the 'denarrated' story it lands at the bottom of the sea ('He was lost for ever, only a small silver hare to keep him company in the dark.') The spine has an image of a soaring skylark

[68] Some of the early review comments for *Life after Life* on Goodreads and Amazon are even more bewildered than those for *A God in Ruins*. Examples include 'I can't recommend anyone devote time to a novel as resistant to story as this one'(Goodreads 2018: *Joe*); 'there didn't seem to be any "rules" like there usually are in books about time travel and other magical occurrences' (Goodreads 2012: *Melissa*); 'I'm not sure I can communicate how angry this book made me and how angry I am that I gave up enough of my life to read all 529 pages' (Goodreads 2013: *Michael*).

[69] Sam Baker, personal correspondence, September 2019

(referencing the skylarks overhead during walks at Fox Corner that bookend the novel), while the endpapers feature an injured skylark raining down feathers. Feathers continue to fall over the back cover. While most readers are not likely to try and read the trajectory of the plot in the design before they embark on reading, it does give a retrospective sense that this is a unified project: that its material form echoes its narrative construction.

As we saw in Chapter One, Abbott suggests that closure in the novel may occur at a level of expectations or at a level of questions, or both (2008:54). We have noted the multiple ways in which Atkinson aims for resolution at the level of questions in *A God in Ruins*, partly, I would suggest, in an attempt to mitigate the fact that the very form of the novel is designed to resist closure at the level of expectations. We have also seen how both publisher and author work to frame the reader's horizon of expectations. The material form of the book is also a powerful tool in conveying information about genre and in this case it conveys the strong sense that this is a 'literary' historical novel. The image of the hare is from an eighteenth-century painting by Jacques Charles Oudry from the National Museum in Warsaw; the drawing of the bird is in a similar period style. In terms of the book's literary qualities, a poetic passage quoted from the book on the back jacket evokes Teddy's memories, visual and sensory, of the war: 'the Alps in moonlight, a propeller blade flying through the air, a face, pale in the water. […] Sometimes the overwhelming stench of lilacs, at other times a sweetly held dance tune.' In terms of expectations, Abbott draws attention to what he describes as 'two imperfectly balanced needs: on the one hand to see them fulfilled, on the other hand to see them violated' (2008:55). He gives the example of the end of Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) when audience expectations are 'rudely violated' with an ending that insinuates a much darker genre of film than they had understood themselves to be watching. Similarly, with *A God in Ruins*: the ending signals a recategorisation of genre. The book has been signalled as a historical novel, a sprawling family saga, a story of war heroism. Readers think they know what they are getting but with its unexpected closure, expectations of genre are shifted. The novel becomes, in a sense, the kind of post-traumatic or post-apocalyptic narrative described by Berger in *After the End* (1999) in which existing structures of identity, language, and memory have been erased and narratives must be reconstructed by means of their traces, their survivors and their ghosts. We might indeed read it as a novel about closure, in a wider Kermodean sense: a quest to know the shape of life in relation to the perspectives of time, 'to be related to a beginning and to an end' (1967:4). For Abbott, the surprise at the ending of *Vertigo* 'casts a light backward over the whole film, giving it a new shape and tone'(Abbott

2002:55) and this is also the case with *A God in Ruins*: re-reading will always have the perspective of hindsight. We will wonder how it was we didn't always see it that way. Even to reread the last line of the excerpt quoted by the publisher on the jacket is to realise that it has signalled, all along, that 'the fire and the sickening hurtle of the fall to earth' is, in fact, 'the inescapable end itself'.

In Chapter Seven I suggested that one of the uses of a practice-derived vocabulary might be in undertaking what Felski (2015) describes as a 'post-critical reading' in which scholars place themselves 'in front of' the text reflecting what it suggests and what it makes possible. Atkinson is a writer skilled in taking readers outside their comfort zone and confronting a more experimental form than they had anticipated. In a review of Atkinson's follow-up novel *Transcription* Dee (2018) asked:

> What are we really talking about when we talk about genre? It's essentially a contract, a set of conventions whose comforts are meant to beckon the reader inside a fictional world wherein less conventional things might then happen. This is Atkinson in a nutshell. She is a complicated writer, but one conscious of her readers, always mindful of our ability to keep up.

The question of how Atkinson navigates her commitment to communicate 'less conventional things' with responsibility to her readers and both publisher's and readers' expectations of genre is just as relevant to *A God in Ruins*. In analysing the novel's ending, one is struck by the extent to which the ending 'works' both in the terms outlined by narratologists and according to the criteria suggested by respondents in Part Two. She is an author who clearly understands the dynamics of narrative and is highly attuned to what readers and publishers want. At the same time, she is interested in what becomes possible if you bend the usual rules. Can you write beyond the realms of the narratable? Can you strip away 'suspense' from large portions of your narrative and still make it compelling? Can you provide signs of geographic closure yet suddenly send a character across the world to Bali? Can you obliviate your central characters and maintain the emotional power of the novel? Can you write an ending that is open but also has a sense of both completeness and closure? What is made possible here is the idea of a novel with an intellectually complex structure that challenges conventional ideas of how narrative works but is still able to satisfy on emotional, ethical and intellectual and psychological levels. In Norris's terms it is a novel guided by a 'tractor beam' in that the author knows exactly where she is going. The danger is that there is a strong sense of a controlling agency, suggesting a teleological approach to fiction. One of the reviewers on Amazon remarked of Atkinson: 'I've

sometimes felt put off by her sheer presence on the page, the almost ruthless delight she takes in authorial manipulation.' (Amazon review 2018: *Charles*). In her interview for Chapter Five Helen Garnons-Williams made a comparison between *A God in Ruins* and Ian McEwan's *Atonement* noting that, while both have endings that 'pull the rug from under you', Atkinson's volte-face is much more of a shock to the reader. I will discuss the different effects of the ending of *Atonement* in the next chapter, alongside another text which has a similarly disconcerting effect at its ending: Wyl Menmuir's *The Many*, but one significant difference is that it becomes clear at the end of the novel that Briony is a homodiegetic narrator; she is not an 'author as auteur' as Atkinson is in *A God in Ruins*. Booth argues that 'a fact, when it has been given to us by the author […] is a very different thing from the same "fact" when given to us by a fallible character in the story.'(1984:175). Building on Barthes' (1970) concepts of *texte lisible* and *text scriptible*, Fiske (1987:94–6) proposes that we might consider a third category, of *producerly* texts. For Fiske writerly texts resist both coherence and closure, relying on the interpretive efforts of the reader, but producerly texts are both readerly and writerly. They combine narrative coherence and momentum with some of the openness of writerly texts allowing audiences to read them at a range of levels and to produce their own meanings. I suggest that the ending of *A God in Ruins* reveals it as a 'producerly' text, while I will argue that the ending of *Atonement* reveals just the opposite: that despite its narrative momentum, its openness demands that it is understood as a writerly text.

Chapter Nine – Reading Endings: Responsibility, Genre and Landing in Ian McEwan, Wyl Menmuir, Kazuo Ishiguro and Naomi Alderman

Introduction

This final substantive chapter builds on the detailed reading of *A God in Ruins* in the previous chapter to interrogate themes that have emerged as central to my central research question of how we read the function, role and intent of endings within a novel that we understand as both a mediated art work and as a product for exchange. The chapter is organised around two of those themes. The first is responsibility to the reader: what does a 'responsible' ending look like in twenty-first century fiction? How does the author navigate conflicting responsibilities (e.g. responsibility as storyteller, responsibility as artist, ethical responsibility) and how do we read these responsibilities when we are presented with different versions of the author/storyteller (e.g. narrator, implied author, flesh and blood author)? The second is how we understand the distinction between 'literary fiction' and other fictional genres and what kind of role endings have in that judgement. Is the concept of responsibility understood differently from different genre perspectives? As in the previous chapter, my intention is to put to work both the theoretical and practice-based discourses outlined in Parts One and Two allowing illustrations and clarifications of some of the key concepts explored earlier in the thesis to emerge. One of the most suggestive of these is the concept of 'landing', which I see as distinct from concepts of closure or of completeness put forward by narrative theorists in that it allows us to conceive a point where the reader's affective, intellectual and psychological responses to the text converge, adding an aesthetic dimension, which may include geographical landing (the 'journey's end), a sense of musical finality or a final resonant image.

In putting to work a practice-based discourse based on my interviewees' insights and experience, it makes sense to select from the body of novels discussed by participants in the research. I begin with two novels which, like *A God in Ruins* (though in very different ways) 'pull the rug out from under the reader's feet' with their ending. These are *Atonement* (McEwan 2001) which was discussed by both publishers and reading groups in Chapters Five and Six and *The Many* (Menmuir 2016), which was discussed its author in Chapter Four. The idea of reader responsibility that we found in Part One in Conrad's praise

for Henry James's work, that readers should 'remain with the sense of the life still going on' (Conrad 1921) would seem to be undermined by the ending of *Atonement,* as it is in *A God in Ruins*, by a revelation of the extent to which trauma disrupts narrative. In contrast, *The Many* suggests a completely different life beyond the life of the novel, but one that must be imagined by the reader. I address the second theme of the chapter, the question of literary-genre distinctions and narrative expectations though a case study of the field of 'literary science fiction'. I earlier cited O'Gorman and Eaglestone's argument that genre fiction operates on a series of generic conventions mutually understood by writers, publishers and readers and that even in developing or challenging those boundaries it reinforces them, while literary fiction is, by contrast, 'free and unbound' (2018:6). If this is the case, how do we read novels that tread on those boundaries? Are they taking on generic strictures precisely so as to free and unbind readers' expectations, thus creating a horizon of change that challenges both genres? I focus on two novels that have science fiction settings and draw on central tropes of science fiction; both are by authors with strong 'literary' credentials including literary prize nominations and both are published by literary imprints.[70] They are *Never Let Me Go* (Ishiguro 2006) which was discussed by John Sutherland in Chapter Five and *The Power* (Alderman 2016) which was discussed by Sam Baker in Chapter Five and by some of the reading groups in Chapter Six.

Disruptive Endings and Reader Responsibility: Atonement and The Many

In discussing *A God in Ruins* in the preceding chapter, I drew attention to Atkinson's strategy of multiple endings, providing the reader with different, and sometimes incongruent, forms of resolution. For the reader completing *Atonement* I suggest that four alternative endings are immediately available:

1. The 'story ending' of the novel within a novel, in which Robbie and Cecilia are reunited, love endures but Briony is never forgiven
2. The purportedly 'real' ending of the love story, explained within the frame narrative, in which Robbie dies of septicaemia at Dunkirk and Cecilia in a bomb blast in London shortly afterwards.

[70] Faber & Faber and Viking

3. The metanarrative reveal that this is not, after all, a story about Cecilia and Robbie but a story about Briony and how the events of one day in 1935 have shaped the rest of her life and led to her career as a writer
4. An imagined ideal ending in which an elderly Robbie and Cecilia, still in love, have forgiven Briony and returned with her to the family's old house.

These endings offer different forms of resolution. Ending 1 is an 'authentic' happy ending, in the modernist rather than the nineteenth century sense, in that some things are resolved and there is a Jamesian 'sense of the life still going on'. Cecilia and Robbie's reduced circumstances and continuing hostility to Briony suggest psychological veracity and the moving account of Cecilia's tenderness towards the damaged Robbie, recalling her former affection toward her sister, offers some degree of affective resolution. In a traumatised world this is the best outcome that could be hoped for. In cognitive terms however, there is little sense of completeness. Many questions remain and, in terms of Briony's atonement we are clearly at the beginning of a journey rather than a journey's end: the final words of the draft are 'she was ready to begin'. Ending 2 is a tragic ending, but without any of classical unities that might shape reader expectations. It offers a different frame for the narrative trajectory with an emphasis on the ethical commitment of the writer to bear witness to the truncated narratives of war. It is disruptive to any sense of ethical resolution, in that the good perish while the untrustworthy (Marshall & Lola) thrive. Ending 3 challenges traditional narrative closure in subverting the expected ending and privileging resolution at an intellectual level. The reader has a new perspective that makes sense of the narrative, but there is also some sense of affective/aesthetic resolution in Briony's homecoming, the reprisal of her play, *The Trials of Arabella* and the sense that she has completed her journey. Ending 4 is a fantasy, but it has a radical effect in reopening what has previously been held out, in different ways, in each of the three alternative versions, as a relatively closed narrative. It makes clear that any posited ending is provisional. Briony's statement that 'with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, [the novelist] is also God' suggests that the limits of openness are circumscribed by the versions of record that the author makes available to the reader and by the lifetime of the novelist (which in Briony's case we know to be almost at an end). However, I would like to suggest that an attentive reading of the novel (and especially a *second* reading of the novel in which reader expectations are 'attuned' by elements of the first reading) proffers a more radical openness, made possible by a consideration of the divergent 'responsibilities' of the

implied author and the flesh-and-blood author, respectively Briony (as the author-narrator of both the novel within a novel and the epilogue)[71] and McEwan (as author of the novel *Atonement*, which encompasses both these elements). In such an attuned reading, it becomes clear that knowledge of the unreliability of Briony as the implied author is a *mise-en-abyme*. It places the reader in a hall of mirrors in which potentially, everything we think we know is unstable.

Marsh's careful narratological reading of *Atonement* (2017) shows how the construction of the narrative and the force of the epilogue work to convince readers that Briony's revised version of the events of summer 1935 is the correct one. He argues that this effectively shuts down 'a more radical rereading which concludes not simply that Briony has "made it all up" but which probes some of the fundamental orthodoxies that Briony's persuasive and self-justificatory narrative has entrenched.' (2017:1333). Marsh notes, for example, that the reader can have no certainty either of Robbie's innocence or of Paul Marshall's guilt: both are viewed entirely through the lens of Briony's revisionist account (subject, indeed to multiple revisions over the years) and that – even before we get to the valorising account of Robbie's war – it is Briony's narrative choice of what we should see, and from whose perspective, that frame our understanding of his good character.

But it is not just the revelation that the narrator is homodiegetic rather than extradiegetic that informs a re-reading of this novel. A second engagement with the elliptical, Modernist style of the opening section, is bound to recall the critical feedback on Briony's early draft, *Figures by a Fountain,* apparently from Cecil Connolly (with additional insights from Elizabeth Bowen), which we have read in Part Three, and Briony's immediate resolution to become a more honest writer in response. (McEwan 2001:320). We become attuned readers, informed by 'implied publishers' (to coin a critical term) Connolly and Bowen, in our assessment of how much revision was made to this section. We see that it still owes much to Woolf and other Modernists: the detailed imagery of light, stone and water continues to dominate, the text retains its multiple, fragmented perspectives and the

[71] The status of the concluding section (the postscript) of Briony's novel is unclear. Her initials, with the place and date at the end of Part Three indicate that this marks the end of Briony's final draft. Phelan (2005b:322) describes the postscript as a 'diary entry', but there is no textual evidence for the terminology. McEwan told an interviewer that in a pre-publication draft he included a writer's biography for Briony Tallis at the end of the book (i.e. after the postscript). This suggests that the postscript may have always been intended as an epilogue to Briony's published novel (Begley 2002).

narrative is still characterised by a lack of forward momentum in its early chapters[72] (several Goodreads and Amazon reviews read this as a failing). It is clear some of Connolly's advice has been followed in the published novel: a Ming vase has become a Meissen vase, for example. Has Briony also followed Connolly's advice to build up the psychological tension of the narrative, to give more to readers who 'retain a childlike desire to be told a story'? Briony's immediate response to the review suggests that she no longer wishes to 'hide behind some borrowed notions of modern writing and drown her guilt in a stream – three streams! – of consciousness' (McEwan 2001:320) but, in an 'attuned' rereading we might be tempted to suspect that, if not her own guilt, she has found a place to hide other uncomfortable anomalies within the multi-perspectival narrative, thus dissolving any certainty about what actually happened on that summer's day in 1935.

Similar levels of instability are induced by a consideration of the kaleidoscopic effect of Briony's triple presence in the novel as participant and instigator of the action, narrator and implied author. In her Balham flat we hear Cecilia confronting Briony: 'If you were lying then, why should a court believe you now? There are no new facts, and you're an unreliable witness.' Briony's disquiet at Cecilia's view that she is a liar: 'weak, stupid, confused cowardly, evasive – she had hated herself for everything she had been, but she had never thought of herself as a liar' (2001:336), is complicated by the fact that she has fictitiously constructed the scene in which Cecilia's states the truth of her unreliability and that within this fictitious scene she has also constructed her own denial of her unreliability. We are again in the hall of mirrors.

A second reading also brings into focus the variation of style between the three parts of the novel, which we now understand as marking Briony's developing literary ambition. As we have seen, Part One is a prototype modernist novel, with short numbered chapters, a relatively linear sense of time, fractured perspectives that take us inside characters' heads, and storytelling through images, light and shade. Part Two reads as the authentic testimony of an eye-witness to the retreat to Dunkirk. Internally focalised from Robbie's perspective, it is both a gritty, realist account of the present chaos, and a study of Robbie's mind and its obsessions, flashing back to 1935 and the intervening years and returning, again and again, to single moments with Cecilia. Both Briony and McEwan reassure the

[72] In fact, as Mullan (2018) has pointed out, the early chapters move very slightly backwards in time, with each new perspective.

reader (the former in the postscript in which she writes of her extensive research at the Department of Documents in the Imperial War Museum; the latter in the acknowledgments page in which the same source is credited alongside several books) that the events in this section are based on detailed historical research. Part Three retains the juxtaposition of the visceral present and the interior life, but rather than a dialogue between reality and memory, it is a dialogue between reality and fiction: a move to the postmodern – self-conscious and self-referential. Each of these novel-fragments carries different expectations of endings: if the 'proper ending' to Part One is Ending 1, outlined above, with the lovers reunited; the ending attached to Part Two is the gritty and unsatisfactory truth: that nothing was ever resolved; while Part Three has its own metanarrative conclusion.

As with *A God in Ruins*, popular reviews of *Atonement* suggest that readers are divided, both on the stylistic anomalies[73] and on the great conceit at the end of the novel. The primary reasons for disagreement seem not to be the destabilising cognitive complexity, but arguments over whether the narrative is 'authentic' in emotional terms (we might recall Carthew's argument that the reader needs to feel that 'you [the author] haven't lied to me this whole way') or literary terms (we might remember Laura Williams' argument about 'making a book not feel like a literary enterprise'):

> This is a perfect love story if you can allow for a heartbreaking end. The fact that the flawed Briony gives the lovers some fictional happiness as a last act of generosity, makes the reader forgive that precocious girl.
> (Goodreads 2015c: *Adam*)

> Basically, what McEwan asks of us is that we who have willingly suspended our disbelief to follow the novel's narrative arc accept that we've been duped by a clever writer. [. . .] It feels manipulative and gimmicky – and it spoils an otherwise very good piece of writing.
> (The New Southern Gentleman Blog, 2014)

In early reviews of the novel several critics expressed similar reservations: Schwartz (2002) criticised McEwan's 'unwarranted turn to postmodernism' at the end of the novel, while

[73] For example: 'The first part of the book where McEwan's laying the foundation for the story was very tedious [...] too wordy and I [...] had a difficult time getting through it. The section I loved the most was Robbie's. [...] I loved his description of the war.' (Goodreads 2011: *Carissa*).

Wood (2002) suggested that 'the author is himself finally incapable of resisting the distortions of tidiness', noting that, despite the broader canvas, the novel's ending recalled the 'careful, excessively managed universes' of McEwan's early fiction. He added 'McEwan's fictions have been prodigies: they do everything but move us.' Recent critical consensus has tended be with Finney who argued that those cited above are misreadings and that the literary self-consciousness that reviewers note at the end is actually present throughout the novel where it continually undermines the classic realist mode of its narration (2004:68). I would argue that 'misreading' is the wrong term here. It is part of McEwan's intent that the novel should be read differently on first reading and second reading. On first reading, we are supposed to be swept away by the novel and convinced by the narrative. We are directed to understand it as a third person omniscient narration and to see the internal focalisation by Cecilia and by Robbie as the authentic expression of their thoughts, just as we are directed to understand the account of Robbie's long march to Dunkirk as first-hand testimony. Likewise, a feeling that we have been tricked by a clever writer is integral to the effects of the novel. We are supposed to be furious with Briony; it is essential to her atonement that the reader understands how good she is at telling believable stories. Our affective engagement on first reading of the novel is not just with Cecilia and Robbie; it is with Briony too and it involves anger as well as sympathy. At the end of the book we become aware of the shadow narrative lurking behind the narrative we have just read. Our second reading is of that shadow narrative, also called *Atonement* but by Ian McEwan rather than by Briony Tallis. Our horizon of expectation has shifted to a horizon of change and in doing so our mode of reading shifts, from 'first reader' to 'critical reader'. Briony's novel aims to move – it is an affective reading experience at least until at least until the big reveal at the end of Part Three, but a second reading – of McEwan's novel rather than Briony's – is more about intellectual satisfaction. As Sutherland noted in our interview: 'McEwan is such a skilful mechanist in terms of plot. […] You can't help but admire the machinery he creates.' Sutherland's point is not just about the reader's response to McEwan's artistry; it also implies a mechanistic approach to writing the book, a suggestion reiterated in an article by Mullan who argues that, in *Atonement:*

> the outcome precedes the telling. You are always to realise that the author knows where he is leading you – that it has all been planned, before the first sentence is ever set down. Apprehension takes the place of surprise. You are asked to enjoy being manipulated. (Mullan 2018)

Enjoyment of manipulation, admiration of the machinery: these may be the effects on the reader of a second reading, but what do we know of McEwan's process of writing *Atonement*? In an essay on the publisher's website McEwan recalls:

> Briony was fashioned out of the spare rib of her older sister, Cecilia. The younger Miss Tallis began life as a bit-player. […] It's rare to have an entire character in front of you when you start a novel. Characters walk towards their creators, as if emerging from a mist. […] As events thickened around her and she responded, she took on shape. This is a circular, recursive process. It soon became apparent that her imagination was the element that would disrupt and eventually ruin the love between Cecilia and Robbie. (McEwan 2015).

Thus, far from having what Barney Norris described as a 'tractor beam' guiding his writing, the author's account reveals that the great conceit of the novel grew from the development of Briony as a character. The reader's awareness that Briony, rather than Cecilia and Robbie, is the central figure in the narrative mirrors McEwan's growing awareness during the process of writing. In Chapter Four several of the novelists interviewed talked of a process in which they would 'walk' their characters within a setting, to see what they did. We also found accounts of writing a novel through to its 'authentic' end, and then 'writing back' from the ending to ensure that characters and their actions were integrated into the 'bloodstream' of the novel. While Mullan (2018) observes of McEwan that 'no living British novelist has more expertly or more teasingly exposed the machinery of narrative – and made this exposure the essence of the entertainment', in McEwan's account of his writing practice we see that the machinery of narrative emerges from character, rather than vice versa, and I suggest that this is integral to the affective experience of our first reading of the novel.

Atonement's postscript fulfils the dual functions of an alternative 'narrative' ending to the novel and a 'note from the author' that may seem to have something in common with Kate Atkinson's in speculating on the purpose and limits of fiction. Briony, as implied author, stresses her assiduous research in the Imperial War Museum library, her extensive correspondence with direct witnesses and the availability to her of the correspondence between Cecilia and Robbie while he was serving in France. In doing so she suggests that her responsibility to the reader is bound up in the authenticity of historical detail, in 'bearing witness'. She notes the 'pointillist approach to verisimilitude, the correction of detail that cumulatively gives such satisfaction' as 'we go on our hands and knees and crawl

our way towards the truth.' (2001:359). In doing so she excuses herself from giving a complete historical account of what happens. There is then what appear to be a direct address from author to reader (like Kate Atkinson's in *A God in Ruins*) in which she argues that the moral imperative of fictional narratives is not the same as an imperative to historical veracity:

> What purpose would be served if, say, I tried to persuade my reader, by direct or indirect means, that Robbie Turner died of septicaemia at Bray Dunes on 1 June 1940, that Cecilia was killed in September of the same year by the bomb that destroyed Balham Underground station.[…] How could that constitute an ending? What sense of hope or satisfaction could a reader draw from such an account? Who would want to believe that they never met again, never fulfilled their love? Who would want to believe that, except in the service of the bleakest realism? I couldn't do it to them. […] I know there's always a certain kind of reader who will be compelled to ask, But what *really* happened? The answer is simple: the lovers survive and flourish. (2001:371).

I suggest that the line 'I couldn't do it to them' is deliberately ambiguous in this passage. Is Briony writing here about her responsibility to 'my reader', or about her responsibility to the dead lovers? The reader cannot tell, but a consideration of this point makes clear that Briony's interpretation of her responsibilities as author is not identical to McEwan's, indeed that the 'flesh and blood author's sense of authorial responsibility and the 'implied author's' sense of responsibility may be at odds. Briony's responsibility is not, in fact to her readers at all, but to her story and to herself. It is:

a. to create an account of Robbie's innocence so compelling that it appears irrefutable

b. to ensure that the power of the love story compensates for the previous and present hardships endured by her characters, and thus:

c. to ensure that natural justice is restored and she has atoned for her 'crime'.

To achieve these aims Briony must establish herself as a trustworthy guide. She must convince the reader that:

a. she is now an adult with the power both to empathise

b. she has learned her craft as a novelist

c. she knows the difference between truth and fiction.

It is only in the course of making this case that the question of responsibility to the reader arises at all. Readers must be prepared to put themselves in her hands as storyteller; thus

Briony's direct address, quoted above, which she uses to convince us as readers that the 'lie' of the lovers' survival is in fulfilment of her responsibility to us.

McEwan's responsibility to the reader overlaps with Briony's but adds another, sometimes contradictory layer. Like Briony, he wants to create a narrative that is engaging both emotionally and intellectually. Unlike Briony he wants the reader to get to grips with the complexities of the vexed relationship between fiction and truth. To do both of these things he needs to rehabilitate Briony so that she becomes the novel's point of focus and fascination, and so that the reader accepts her as a brilliant and empathetic writer. In an interview, McEwan explained that he included the scene with Briony at the death bed of the French solider because 'I felt that unless I had some sort of eruption of feeling from Briony – I saw it as a love scene, even though it's a dying scene – there would be something too unreliable about her account of love.' (Sutherland 2002). But McEwan needs to do more than that: he must enable us to see that, like the Meissen vase, there are cracks in the perfect surface of Briony's narrative and the whole thing might just fall apart. Asked whether he intended Briony to be seen as a great writer, McEwan responded: 'I didn't want her to be too good. She's almost as good as me.' (Sutherland 2002). This 'almost' is crucial to the effects of the narrative; indeed one might claim that McEwan's key responsibility to the reader is to reveal himself as a (slightly) better writer than Briony Tallis.

I suggested above that there is an affective disconnect between the first reading of *Atonement* and the second. One might be tempted to suggest that second readings are intrinsically more a cognitive experience than an emotional one. This is not the effect of Wyl Menmuir's *The Many*, which starts as tale of a stranger arriving in a hostile and creepy Cornish fishing village and ends as a story of debilitating grief and its suppression. The narrative is propelled by the promise of a revelation. The village is clearly hiding multiple secrets: How did the sea become contaminated? What are the mysterious container ships on the horizon? Why will none of the fishermen talk about their dead colleague, Perran? Who is the lady in grey and why does she insist on buying the entire catch of diseased fish? But the central mystery the book hides turns out to be what kind of fiction it is. Is it folk horror? (Some readers compare it to *The Wicker Man*). Is it climate fiction? (There are dwindling fish stocks, a poisonous sea and constant surveillance by the Department for Fisheries and Aquaculture). Or is it autofiction? There are elements of all these genres in the novel and no simple solution at the end.

At one level, the ending reveals this to be a narrative of trauma and of the impossibility, for men in particular, of giving voice to it. This story – the 'shadow novel' of the still-birth of Timothy and Lauren's son Perran – emerges straight and clear in a flashback passage towards the end of the novel. Readers become increasingly aware through the scene that elements of descriptive detail are strangely familiar to them: furnishings, cars, the colour blue, a bench beneath a bare tree; they have been woven into the previous narrative almost imperceptibly. Back in the village, strange things happen as symbolism starts to dominate: flood waters rise and recede, great cracks open across the landscape, the container ships on the horizon move silently away. It becomes apparent that Ethan's consciousness and Timothy's consciousness are the same and that 'the many' in the village who will not answer the question 'Who is Perran?' are echoes of Timothy too.

Readers on popular reviewing sites are divided about how they understand and respond to the revelations of the novel's ending. Is the strange, hostile setting a psychotic projection of Timothy's mind, is it allegorical, or is it a real setting that Timothy's grief has distorted?:

> I think the village and its inhabitants are all in Timothy's mind as he retreats into himself with grief over the death of his son. [. . .] If this book is what I think it is, I would actually only give it two stars. In the hope that it is more than I think it is, I am giving it 3 and waiting for someone to clarify what it is about.
> (Goodreads 2016a: *Neil)*

> I read the book in a completely different way. More like a poem, with images & associations which are not to be 'translated', as it were, into something real and explainable. Although I agree with you that Timothy's grief is the driving force behind the novel, I don't think the book is meant to be taken literally, but as a parable for loss and grieving.
> (Goodreads 2016b: *Britta*)

Those who review it most appreciatively tend to be readers who have felt compelled to read the novel twice or who have been able to discuss it with others after their first reading. It clearly belongs in the category of books described in Chapter Six as having a 'first reading quality' and a 'second reading quality':

> It took me two readings before I felt like I was getting somewhere with it – the first time around I was puzzled enough to keep turning pages, and it wasn't until the ending when I realized a) that all is not as it seems on the surface here and b) I absolutely needed to read it again. […] In spite of the fact that it was so enigmatic (and really, some of it is just plain strange at times), I found it a dark, sad and haunting book that I won't be forgetting any time soon.
> (Goodreads 2016c: *Nancy*)

A first reading of the novel is dominated by a sense of the eeriness and hostility of the setting; on a second reading it is the emotionally-wrenching shadow narrative and the interpretation of the mystery it offers that dominates. We realise that the effect of the novel is to invoke in the reader a haunting sense of dread and loss, precisely because that is what Timothy is experiencing. We are forced to read slowly and attentively, piecing together the meaning of the flashback passages in italics.[74] In my interview with Menmuir for Chapter Four, he told me he had always intended this to be a book that readers would have to read twice:

> I wanted it to be a totally different experience reading it the second time because I've […] planted all the information that you need throughout the book. […] I'm not telling you it's a mystery story so therefore you're not looking for the clues, but the clues are all there.

But a second reading of the novel also makes clear that its mysteries cannot be wholly explained by its shadow narrative. The village cannot be understood literally but it is not neatly allegorical either. The experience is designed to be unsettling; the gaps in understanding are part of the effect of the book. Menmuir told me:

> When we travel somewhere […] all the experiences that we take with us colour that experience, so we're never seeing the territory itself. I hope what you get in the book is a series of maps, and they're all incorrect in some ways. None of them map the territory itself.

Menmuir's mapping metaphor is helpful, not only in understanding the relationship between setting and theme in the novel, i.e. what Timothy's mind makes of the village, but also in cataloguing our own emerging responses to it. The novel is intended to have an emotional effect on the reader and that will inevitably colour the reading experience, allowing readers to make their own sense of meaning. He explained that:

> I stuck to my guns on the ending of this one, in that I knew it was a risk for some readers to leave so many things undone, but what I really wanted to get to [...] I almost want the reader to go through a process of grief. […] I felt that by leaving so many things unanswered that you'd get to the end and go 'Oh, why? Why have you done that to me?' and have to work that through.

[74] This is a text design element that would usually be decided by the publisher, but may here have been at Menmuir's request. During our interview he explained that the publisher followed his suggestion to include a blank dedication page. Like the italicised sections this is a textual element hinting at a hidden layer of meaning.

He mentioned that the book had enabled some men, in book groups he had attended, to talk about their own experience of the grief of stillbirth, for the first time in forty or fifty years: 'It's not a therapy but [. . .] what do we as the readers bring to this story? We bring all of our experience.' Menmuir's understanding here equates to Holland's idea of reading through the prism of an identity theme.

Menmuir's sense of responsibility to the reader in this novel is very different from that of Atkinson or McEwan, whose novels involve careful forms of narrative closure, provide evidence of historical veracity and work to suggest a writer in control of the complexities of their narrative. Menmuir's concern, on the other hand, is to write in a way that involves the active participation of readers and that they understand as true at an emotional level. In this sense his work adheres to some of the precepts of Shields' aesthetic manifesto, *Reality Hunger* (2010:5), in which he talks of the emergence of 'a new artistic movement' defined by 'artistic risk, emotional urgency and intensity, reader/viewer participation; [...] a blurring (to the point of invisibility) of any distinction between fiction and nonfiction: the lure and blur of the real.' Unlike Atkinson, for whom endings are her favourite part of the novel, Menmuir admitted in our interview that 'endings are just difficult because they are inherently false structures, in that things don't end, they continue, and yet we have to bring it to a conclusion.' Part of this ambivalence may be in the fact that, unlike Atkinson's confident tearing down of the fourth (and fifth) wall, Menmuir eschews any notion of the controlling author, suggesting instead, like Booth, that the reader constructs an idea of the author through the narrative. He noted the influence on his writing of Umberto Eco's *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods* (1994): 'Here's your reader and then you've got to work down through all of these layers and somewhere within there is the writer.'

The writer who appears beneath the narrative layers of *The Many* comes into focus at the very end of the novel, in the section describing the stillbirth of baby Perran. This is not a meeting between author and reader like Atkinson's, with the author firmly in charge and leading the reader; it is a meeting at a human level, emphasising common experience. Menmuir explained that this scene was written years in advance of the rest of the novel, but that having written it, he put it away in a drawer: 'I didn't really feel like I had a right to tell that particular story.' He returned to it, from an oblique angle and with much more clarity about his narrative responsibilities, including his conviction that 'with that particular story I can only do justice to a man's perspective'. He sought permission from his family

before approaching publishers. His account suggests that though he clearly does have a sense of responsibility to an imagined, ideal reader, his most important responsibility is to the story itself. In this sense he might be considered a Briony Tallis rather than an Ian McEwan: this is no outsider-author taking the reader's hand, but a participant-author who needs to tell the story and needs to do it justice.

In Chapter Seven I suggested that a 'responsible' ending in readerly terms may involve both a sense of a life continuing beyond the realms of the narrative, and of hope, even if it is limited or undefined. *The Many* ends with the village disintegrating, Ethan diving into the sea and disappearing and Timothy watching it all silently from a hill outside the village. It is not an ending that tells us that everything is going to be fine; the dark mood of the book is retained, but it does hold out, at least, a possibility of hope:

> He does and does not want to leave this place. But Lauren is not coming. He has been talking to her at a distance for weeks, but it is only now he registers what she has been saying to him. That she is waiting for him at the home they share. (Menmuir 2016:136)

Despite the sense of imprisonment and claustrophobia, we realise the village has never been quite solid and the possibility of a different life has flickered, in brief flashes, throughout the narrative. Ethan's boat is called the *Great Hope*: we may have read this as ironic, but he and Timothy venture in it beyond the blockade of container ships, bringing up nets full of strange, translucent fish. In the first few pages of the novel Timothy finds 'a thin line or a crack, barely perceptible' in one of the windows of his cottage, prefiguring the disintegration of the ending. At the end of the novel, the future remains uncertain. All we are given is a sense of opening: the container ships move out, towards the horizon, Timothy returns home. Everything else must be imagined by the reader.

The Many was published by Salt, with whom Menmuir was able to ignore the concerns of the professional readers about the lack of narrative resolution in order to address a niche reader, with tastes and preferences rather like his own. As discussed in Chapter Seven, the habitus of the major commercial publishers is distinct from that of literary independents like Salt and that has an inevitable bearing on editorial practice. McEwan and Atkinson, both published by imprints of Penguin Random House, are in the rare category of respected literary authors whose books are bestsellers. It is commensurately harder for them to conceive such a specific reader. This is not to suggest that either author is making

concessions to a commercial book market in a way detrimental to their vision as writers; it is more likely that long experience has enabled both authors to become attuned readers of their own work; that their endings exemplify a meeting of art and craft, that may be refined in conjunction with agents and/or editors. In contrast, we might see *The Many* as a novel that very deliberately privileges art over craft. Since *The Many* was published, Menmuir has acquired a literary agent: Peter Straus at Rogers, Coleridge and White, who coincidentally represents both Atkinson and McEwan. Menmuir recalled a conversation with his agent about *The Many,* in which Straus told him that, had he worked on the book, he would have advised more clarification of some of the mysteries of the book: 'things that would then make the impact of the bigger mystery greater'. We cannot know, of course, whether the changes suggested would have resolved the criticisms of the readers cited above, added to the book's sales, or indeed propelled it from Booker longlist to shortlist, but it is a revealing glimpse into the craft of the novel: the discursive practices of 'critical' and 'attuned' reading that shape the published form of the novels we read.

Endings across Genres: Never Let Me Go and The Power

In an essay written in 1975, Ursula Le Guin argued that science fiction (SF) is 'a true metaphor to our strange times,[…] a crazy protean, left-handed monkey wrench, which can be put to any use the craftsman has in mind', or a mirror 'broken into numberless fragments, any one of which is capable of reflecting, for a moment, the left eye and the nose of the reader and also the farthest stars shining in the depths of the remotest galaxy.' (1979:115—116). In the even-stranger twenty-first century present, novelists in increasing numbers, including those with no background or established audience in science fiction (SF), have taken up Le Guin's 'left-handed monkey wrench' for varied literary purposes. Kazuo Ishiguro and Naomi Alderman are two of these; we might equally have discussed recent novels by Margaret Atwood, Jeanette Winterson, Michel Faber, David Mitchell, Colson Whitehead, Emily St. John Mandel or Ian McEwan. Whether or not these novels are categorised as SF, by publishers, prize judges, readers or indeed by novelists themselves remains a matter of contention.

In order to consider the narrative form of SF-inflected literary novels by authors including those above, we need first to understand the expected form of generic SF. One of the most influential accounts of the distinction of the SF narrative is Darko Suvin's work (1979) in

which he outlines the concept of the *novum*, or 'new thing': an idea he takes from Ernest Bloch's concept of the 'unexpectedly new' which pushes humanity towards the future (Moylan 1982). The novum (or nova) is what differentiates our world from the world of the fiction. In Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* the novum is the technology to breed human clones to provide organ donations; in Alderman's *The Power* the novum is the skein that women have developed, close to their collarbone, from which they can emit jolts of electricity. In Adam Roberts' gloss, its central feature is 'not so much the ingenuity of the novum, or the strangeness of it […] but the symbolic purchase its point of difference provides on the world we live in.' (2000:20). *The Power* offers an excellent example of this dynamic, evident in Alderman's argument (2017) that 'nothing happens to men in the novel […] that is not happening to a woman in our world today.' Suvin goes on to say that the 'necessary and sufficient conditions' of SF as a genre are 'the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition' (1979:8–9). The novum is validated by the presence of both features in the narrative: we have to recognise a world that is both strange and plausible within the constraints of science. It is this scientific plausibility that distinguishes SF from fantasy fiction.

In the relationship between narrative form and literary reputation, SF bears the legacy of the famous literary dispute between H.G. Wells and Henry James over the relative values of the 'novel of ideas' and the 'novel of character'.[75] Roberts argues that popular SF tends to avoid 'the trappings of mainstream fiction' such as well-rounded characters or a fine prose style, 'so as not to distract its readership from the conceptual experiment it represents.' (2000:14). While there are no rigid generic understandings of what a SF ending should look like, it seems likely that a form privileging concept and plot over character and literary style will privilege narrative resolution in some form. SF novelist Nick Harkaway (2020) explains that 'drama requires resolution of some sort. I tend to provide fairly solid outcomes because I ask people to consider complex ideas, often with the implication that these are real-world issues in one way or another, and throwing them an emotional fog bank at the last feels mean.' Another writer, Charles Stross (2020) argues that: 'readers […] generally seek closure at the end of the thematic or plot arc of a story. A sense that outstanding questions have been resolved, at least for a time, to their satisfaction: that there's nothing major left to learn about the events or emotions described.' In a Twitter discussion

[75] See Hammond 1988:. 24–41

(Science Fiction Forum 2020) readers suggested a range of preferred outcomes, some of which clearly follow from Suvin's notion of cognitive estrangement:

> Things need to be tied up in a manner consistent with the way the story has been going. Even in a non-hard SF story, if it has been at least paying lip service to scientific principles, it's a bad idea to suddenly introduce something comparable to magic or divine acts.
>
> SF often works best when the milieu of abstraction from the Today serves to hold up the mirror to our humanity. Good endings serve that end.
>
> [I]t doesn't necessarily need to be a happy ending that resolves everything, but it needs to provide a release of (at least almost) all the tension that the plot has been ratcheting up. Without that it's not a finished story.

Within the publishing industry, SF is largely separated from literary fiction: Specialist imprints include Gollancz (Hachette) and Del Rey (Penguin Random House); there are also separate book prizes including the Arthur C. Clarke and BSFA Awards. But as a literary mode, its publication is not confined to genre-specific imprints or prizes. Mainstream literary imprints such as Jonathan Cape and Bloomsbury publish novels that draw on some of the genre tropes of SF, though they are often by authors who, like Alderman and Ishiguro, do not specialise in the genre. Such 'crossover' fiction has sometimes been referred to, in a term coined by Bruce Sterling (1989), as 'slipstream' fiction. Margaret Atwood (2011) describes this as a narrative form 'making use of the air currents created by science fiction proper'. In Kelly and Kessel's definition (2006) slipstream is 'the literature of cognitive dissonance and strangeness triumphant': they argue that it violates the tenets of realism, borrows from popular genres but cannot be defined by them and is postmodern in character, acknowledging its own fictionality and breaking narrative rules. While the 'generic' SF of Gollancz or Voyager seem never to appear on shortlists for the mainstream literary prizes, 'slipstream' novels sometimes do: Atwood's *The Testaments* was joint winner of The Booker in 2019, *Hystopia* by David Means was longlisted in 2016. Sometimes the same novels are nominated for mainstream and genre-specific prizes, as was the case with Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, shortlisted for both The Man Booker Prize in 2005 and the Arthur C. Clarke Award in 2006.

Kazuo Ishiguro's 2005 novel *Never Let Me Go* is a reworking of one of the foundational tropes of science fiction: the 'Frankenstein' theme of the artificial creation of life. It answers most of Suvin's generic conditions. It has a novum, in the chilling idea that genetic

engineering might have bred a hidden society of clones whose only purpose is to provide organ donation. That novum clearly fulfils Roberts' criteria of providing symbolic purchase on our world and on ourselves. However, the novel is distinct from the vast majority of generic SF in being set in a recognisable England of the recent past and it begins without anything that we would recognise as science fictional content. The occasion of the narrative is Kathy's attempt to 'make sense of her span' in relation to time. Though only thirty-one, she talks as if she is very old: we discover that she has already outlived almost everyone she knows. As she hesitantly pieces together her memories of Hailsham, the seemingly idyllic boarding school where she grew up, and recounts her current life as a carer to organ donors, readers find themselves in the kind of emotional fogbank described by Harkaway: what is behind this and why does any of it matter? The narrator's difference and destiny are not fully revealed until seven chapters in, when it becomes clear that this is a story told by a clone and that what is at stake is what it means to be human.

The novel is regarded as a contemporary literary classic. It is, nonetheless, a book with an ending that divides audiences. Or, more precisely, it is the full realisation, at the end of the novel, that the protagonists will not make any attempt to resist their fate, that some readers feel breaks the 'compact' of the SF novel:

> I found the book overwhelmingly powerful, but I am bothered by the issue of passivity – given that it's clear that the 'students' could pass for non-clones in the society around them.
> (Guardian Book Club participant, cited in Mullan 2006b)

> The characters we often look up to in Dystopian tales are the ones who sacrifice life & limb to dismantle their society's flawed ideas about social justice. […] By the end, there isn't even an outright condemnation of the Dystopian set up. It's left up to the reader to decide how their own morality applies to the situation.
> (Goodreads 2015d: *Mary*)

> Humans simply aren't made to be receptors of a ghastly fate designated by others. Such a situation can be presented convincingly, as in Huxley's *Brave New World*, but that novel presents a near-complete system of control. [. . .] [Here] no explanation is given and the partial picture presented through the limited viewpoint of the narrator leaves too many questions unanswered.
> (Amazon 2019: *Michael*)

Such reviews suggest that readers may have particular generic expectations of fictions that depict the artificial creation and control of human life. They expect either acts of resistance or rebellion as in *Blade Runner* (1982) or a detailed scientific explanation of why resistance

is impossible, as in Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932). The novel is perceived as, at some level, unsatisfying (even if it is also emotionally powerful, as the first reviewer suggests) partly because the reader's 'horizon of expectations' is shaped by ideas that come from generic SF of what the genre does. Jauss (1970) tells us that within the dialectic of expectation and change, readers tend to respond favourably to work that challenges their expectations. One of the generic expectations of SF is that it will challenge, at a cognitive level: that is the purpose of the novum. What readers perhaps do not expect is the different kind of challenge that Ishiguro issues, which is twofold: first, the insider narration propels us into the emotional world of the clones; second, Ishiguro's resistance to providing a detailed scientific explanation confronts us not just with 'the world we live in' (as Roberts suggests) but with 'the left eye and the nose of the reader' (as Le Guin suggests). Readers are forced not only into an affective response, but, as Mary suggests in the comments above, into an ethical one too.

Ishiguro has been asked in interviews why he resists offering rational explanations to some of the puzzles of the novel. He claims to have no interest in using SF apparatus to invent a technical explanation, suggesting that this is why the novel is set in the 1990s rather than in the far future, and of objections to the clones' passivity he says: 'Let's just assume that it is out of the question for them to escape. There is some big reason why it is impossible. You just ask the reader to enter into the conceit.' (Mullan 2006b). There is also, of course, a clear literary motivation for his decision: the narrator, Kathy H. writes from inside her world, so the reader knows only what she knows. What is more her narrative clearly addresses a reader who is a fellow clone, as we see from textual asides such as 'I don't know how it was where you were, but […]' (2005:13). The novel's power, and its tragedy are in the realisation of how little Kathy (as a clone) knows or expects of her life. It is a novel that the reader must piece together through the narrator's gaps, silences and misrememberings. This is a narrative technique that tends to be the trait of the literary rather than the genre novel. In Chapter Two I discussed Iser's contention (1978) that the reader's experience is created by the interplay between determinate and indeterminate meaning in the text: the former based on what the text tells us, the latter by what it leaves out or does not fully explain. Science fiction tends to privilege determinate meaning at the level of narrative; in other words that the novelist creates a fully-realised and fully-explained parallel world, and only when the reading is complete does the reader look into the mirror it has created. Ishiguro's technique is almost the opposite: the reader must build

Kathy's world piece by piece, and in doing so a range of meanings are opened as the narrative progresses: an Arendtian vision of the banality of evil, the dehumanisation of those we regard as 'other', our own mortality and our passivity in the face of a limited life span, the shoring up of fragments of memory against our ruin, the importance of belonging to a place or a family.

Some critics have argued that science fiction is a setting rather than a theme or a genre in *Never Let Me Go*. Harrison notes:

> Inevitably, it being set in an alternate Britain, in an alternate 1990s, this novel will be described as science fiction. But there's no science here. [...] This extraordinary and, in the end, rather frighteningly clever novel isn't about cloning, or being a clone, at all. It's about [...] the raw, infuriating, completely personal sense of our lives never having been what they could have been. (2005).

Menand argues that Ishiguro has always been 'expert at arranging his figurines against shadowy and suggestive backdrops'. He sees the setting of *Never Let Me Go* as a perfect fit for the novelist's strength as a fabulist in the mode of Kafka or Beckett, whose characters are always in some way 'simulators of humanness, figures engineered to pass as "real."'(2005) He nonetheless suggests that apart from the setting, it is only the scene at the end of the book, where the mysteries of Kathy's 'privileged' education are revealed, that 'pushes the novel over into science fiction, and this is not, at heart, where it wants to be.' This is both a strangely reductive view of science fiction as well as a dismissal of an ending that does much more than offer a 'staged revelation'. What if the novel wants to be both science fiction and literary fiction, challenging readers of both? Shields (2010) writes that genre is 'a minimum security prison' (rather like Hailsham) and this is how Ishiguro treats it in the novel. Formally, it is science fiction stripped back to its bare essentials, but Ishiguro's world-building and his use of mood and tone augment its formal effects. It meets Suvin's minimum definitional criteria and illustrates Ursula Le Guin's contention that 'serious science fiction is just as much about the real world and human beings as realistic novels are.' Ishiguro sketches a world operating in tangent with ours, just out of sight, set in a defamiliarised England: bleak and empty. Once out of school Kathy and her friends have almost no interaction with the wider world. They drive around the country but only on back roads; at one point they peer into an open plan office from the outside, admiring but never belonging. For Hailsham students, the outside world is like the wood beyond the school grounds: if you venture into it you are likely to be found dead with your hands and feet cut off. There is a perennial sense of unimagined dread just out of sight, and a

persistent feeling of the uncanny. The students notice, for example that a character known only as Madame, who comes regularly to collect the student's art, shudders when she sees them and cannot bear to touch them. They have no idea why, but as readers we are reminded of Mori's concept of the uncanny valley (1970): the revulsion triggered by the almost, but not-quite human.

The last two chapters hinge on a powerful melding of these SF and literary elements. In the penultimate chapter there is a plot revelation, clarifying the history of the cloning programme, the purpose of Hailsham and mapping out a still bleaker future for the students, who are suddenly referred to, in a nod to Frankenstein, as 'creatures'. In a devastating appraisal of their otherness, their former teacher, Miss Emily reveals that: 'We're all afraid of you. I myself had to fight back my dread of you almost every day I was at Hailsham.' (2005:264) This scene provides some cognitive resolution in tying up loose ends, but above all, in holding up a mirror to parallel scenarios of seemingly benevolent dehumanisation (colonial missionary work for example), it demands an ethical response from the reader. The scene dashes any hope for the protagonists or the reader that Kathy and Tommy might be treated humanely and allowed to defer their fate. The chapter ends with an explosion of powerless rage from Tommy, as close as the novel comes to 'the full-blooded roar of an event'. Kathy's attempts to suppress his wild fury open a momentary crack in the emotional control of her narration:

> And we stood together like that, at the top of that field, for what seemed like ages, not saying anything, just holding each other, while the wind kept blowing and blowing at us, tugging our clothes, and for a moment, it seemed like we were holding onto each other because that was the only way to stop us being swept away into the night. (2005:269)

She has her emotions almost immediately under control again – her next line is 'you stink of cow poo' – but this tiny slip of the mask makes it impossible to approach the final chapter without reading the suppressed emotion behind the narration. This chapter has Kathy recalling her parting from Tommy, but the fact that he has made his final organ donation is related only in a single, indirect throwaway phrase: a narrative repression that hints at the unbearable shadow narrative of the text. In terms of Phelan's readerly dynamics this final chapter might be read as a 'farewell' – the 'concluding exchanges' between narrator and reader but it is in no sense a 'settling down', since what Tommy has done and what Kathy is preparing to do is to bow their head to a fate that is only ever

described in euphemism, as 'completion'. It is a euphemism that carries a heavy weight in terms of the self-knowledge of the protagonists, implying that with their fourth donation their purpose is complete: 'completion' completes them. Thus, all the protagonists seem almost to will this ending; even Kathy talks about the time being 'just about right' for her to finish her work as a carer (2005:4). It is particularly chilling as a euphemism because we don't know that it is synonymous with death; there are rumours of a half-life beyond completion, in which still-conscious donors are subject to multiple further donations. As we saw in Chapter One, narratologists have frequently conceived of endings in terms of their 'completeness', indeed Phelan's term for the final stage of 'readerly dynamics' at a book's ending is 'completion', by which he means the conclusion of the reader's evolving response to the narrative. The effect of the terms frequent repetition throughout the novel is to foreshadow the ending: like Kathy we know it is inevitable; unlike Kathy we are forced to consider our ethical response to the fact of completion before it occurs.

But the novel does not, in fact, end with completion. Tommy's has happened but is not narrated; Kathy's is yet to come. The novel's final scene offers an aesthetic and emotional landing in very much the terms suggested by Lucy Luck in Chapter Five, with a sense of the world that has been created continuing, a final resonant image and a sense of musical completion in a beat that finishes a phrase. Kathy spends much of her free time driving around the country; she says she is not looking for Hailsham, but this is what Warhol-Down (2010:48) refers to as 'unnarration'. She is clearly always looking for Hailsham; it is her lost domain. In the final scene, shortly after Tommy's completion, she mentally recreates it, in a windy field in Norfolk where she is watching rubbish blowing up into a barbed wire fence: 'I half-closed my eyes and imagined this was the spot where everything I'd ever lost since my childhood had washed up.'(2005:282). In reconjuring Hailsham in the bleakest possible circumstances she is also able to conjure up a living Tommy, and to allow herself to cry silently for a moment. In the last lines, as in the penultimate chapter, a single moment of emotion undercuts the emotional suppression of the narration. This is the affective ending more characteristic of literary fiction than science fiction, but it is not the beat that finishes the phrase. The final beat is a subtle SF twist, with echoes of Orwell's *1984*. Kathy assures her implied reader (who we already know to be a donor, possibly one of those she is caring for) that 'I wasn't sobbing or out of control' and that she was ready 'to drive off wherever it was I was supposed to be.' We see that Hailsham has done its job very effectively. Its students are in control of themselves; they will always be where they are supposed to be.

In contrast to Atwood's avoidance of the term, Naomi Alderman, who was mentored by Atwood for a year while writing *The Power*, explicitly situates her novel within a tradition of feminist science fiction (Alderman 2017) with literary precursors including Margaret Cavendish's *The Blazing World* (1666) and Begum Rokeyo's 'Sultana's Dream' (1905) and the pioneering feminist fictions of Ursula Le Guin and Marge Piercy in the 1960s and 1970s. Alderman has experience of writing in both literary and genre traditions: she is the author of three literary novels and she has worked simultaneously as a games writer for *Perplex City* and *Zombies, Run!* and a genre writer, publishing a Doctor Who novel, *Borrowed Time* in 2011. *The Power* oscillates between genre and literary expectations both stylistically and formally. In terms of its genre credentials, the novel is what the publishing industry refers to as 'high concept fiction' in that it could have been (and indeed may have been) sold on an idea. It has a very clear novum: a sudden, biological change, which appears spontaneously in young women and can be passed on to older women. With power literally at their fingertips, the gender balance is reversed with extraordinary speed and the rewriting of history becomes inevitable. There is a plausible scientific explanation for the novum – an epigenetic mutation triggered by an antidote to nerve gas produced in the Second World War – and there is the sense of cognitive estrangement from a world that is clearly ours, in mirror image. The inverted reality of the storyworld forces us to ask difficult questions about our own world.

Thus, as with *Never Let Me Go*, the theme of the novel and its setting are those of science fiction. Unlike Ishiguro's novel however, Alderman's structure and style bear a closer resemblance to those a reader of generic SF might expect. The novel is closely structured: eight chapters count down to an implied apocalypse, beginning with 'Ten years to go' and ending with 'Here it comes'. So, we are directed to see this, in Kermode's terms as a narrative that is structured by its ending. Each of these chapters is divided into short sections (some only a couple of pages), each focalised from the perspective of one of the four major characters: Allie, a mixed-race teenager in an abusive foster home who escapes to become Mother Eve and found a new religion; Roxy, the only daughter of a gangster family; Tunde, a Nigerian journalist; and Margot, an American politician. In the penultimate chapter we also see events from the perspective of two additional characters: Roxy's brother Darrell and Margot's daughter Jocelyn. In the final chapter this careful structure begins to break down, mirroring the collapse of civilisation it depicts: there are short

sections from the perspective of different voices (mostly unnamed, but by now familiar to the reader), interspersed with omniscient narration in prophetic tones that indicate Phelan's 'signs of closure': 'There will be a rainstorm. It has been long in coming, the dust is parched, the soil longs for soaking, teeming dark water. For the earth is filled with violence, and every living thing has lost its way.' (2016:293).

The novel's action is fast-paced and takes place on a global scale: there are revolutions and political coups; a new religion is established; there is murder and violent rape, child abuse, gang warfare, terrorism and drug trafficking. Stylistically, it is written in the present tense throughout, sentences are short and there are frequent passages of free-indirect dialogue. The novel is clearly is written to read at pace. But the style also bears the traits of Alderman's literary background. First, it draws the reader in, not only at a cognitive level but affectively and viscerally. Alderman's attention to physical experience is a feature of her fiction writing: in all her previous novels there are visceral descriptions of pain, and erotic experience expressed synaesthetically, through sound, smell and taste. *The Power* takes place in a physically-charged world, allowing us, as readers, to enter into the skin of the novel and to feel with the characters. From the beginning we experience both what it is like to have a skein and what it is like to be 'jolted' by one. Alderman's physical writing is distinctive and sometimes unnerving in conjunction with her detached, ironic voice (which one reviewer (Key 2016) compared to Jane Austen) and the ideas-driven narrative. I suggested earlier that the effects on the reader of much generic SF, especially such 'high concept' fiction, tend to be cognitive rather than affective or somatic, thus Alderman's appeal to the embodied reader works to defamiliarise genre, giving both literary and SF readers more than they have bargained for. It can be a discomforting experience: there are, for example, graphic scenes of sexual violence and a 'castration' scene in which Roxy's skein is surgically removed, written with a forensic detail that makes the reader recoil, though this is a body part we do not have.

Second, there are human relationships, generating moments of empathetic recognition in the reader that, like Alderman's physical writing, can sometimes appear discordant with the conceptual invention and high drama of the book, but they end up as important contributors to the novel's purpose. Maternal relationships are a central theme: both the mother-daughter relationships in the novel are damaging and have devastating repercussions. Allie's relationship with her foster mother is abusive to an extent that is only

revealed at the end of the novel; Margot's with Jocelyn is protective but built on incommensurable expectations. Notably, the character at the moral heart of the novel, Roxy, is motherless (in fact the murder of her mother is the occasion for the arrival of her 'power') and the survival of her relationship with her father despite gross betrayal is the final redemptive moment at the novel's conclusion. The female friendships of the novel are torn apart by the machinations of power, but there is a suggestion of the transformative power of an equal sexual relationship in which characters are permitted to acknowledge their weakness rather than demonstrate their strength. Such a moment, between Roxy and Tunde in the penultimate chapter, mitigates the violence and anarchy of the previous scene, in which renegade soldiers tear apart a crowded refugee camp. We move from the stark brutality of killings via jolts to the eyeballs, to an intimate scene between Roxy and Tunde in which: 'their bodies have been rewritten by suffering [...] They move slowly and easily, taking account of each other's particular pains, smiling and sleepy and for a moment without fear.' (2016:288–9). The haptic shift and change of pace between these scenes is, in James Phelan's term, one of the novel's 'signs of closure'. It ensures the reader retains an empathetic connection with the narrative immediately prior to its apocalyptic conclusion. The novel's human relationships also draw attention to the its realist elements: this is a world shockingly like ours. It is characterised by populist politics, conspiracy theory, intolerance of difference, media manipulation, religious evangelism, criminal opportunism and of course deeply divisive gender politics, in the midst of which, flawed and morally compromised humans are trying to live reasonable, connected lives.

Third, there are intertextual allusions woven through the novel. We have seen that Alderman situates herself within the tradition of feminist science fiction, and *The Power*'s novum – a genetic mutation that disrupts gender relations – situates the book in the tradition, for example, of Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969). One might also read *The Power* as a countertext to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915), which posits a woman-only society as a paradise, without conflict, deprivation or coercion. There are frequent engagements with and allusions to scripture, especially the Old Testament, introduced by the novel's epigraph which is a passage from Samuel. These engagements have both playful and serious intent: on the one hand they suggest to the reader that, although this may be a thrilling ride it will reveal universal truths, on the other the playful irony of the narrative voice suggests that the real danger is that religion takes itself, and its universal truths, far too seriously. There is also an intertextual current from the Romantics,

including fragments of Book XI of *The Prelude*: 'Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive', in Tunde's eager reaction to the initial uprisings (2013:61). If the early revolution is expressed in Wordsworthian terms, the metanarrative frame that opens and closes the novel references a quite different Romantic text: Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826). Shelley's apocalyptic narrative starts with a framing account of her discovery of a prophecy in the Sibyl's cave near Naples, telling of the late twenty-first century fall of civilization. It has been read as a lament for the passion and radicalism of the romantic movement, suggesting that *The Power* can be read as a parallel warning of the dangers of any revolution, however much it is justified, ending in fundamentalism, violence and abuse of power. These passages cement the relationship between our culture and the world of the novel, but they also serve to place the novel itself within a wider literary tradition, not just recent science fiction but an earlier history of apocalyptic writing and feminist fiction.

These contrasting elements of the book: detached irony, biblical language, literary allusion, physically charged writing, affective passages and genre momentum work sometimes together and sometimes in conflict. While we are rarely disoriented by the novel, we are frequently jolted out of our comfort zone. The ending is the point of convergence for the narrative, stylistic and intertextual threads. I previously described this as an end-determined narrative and I think this is true in three ways. First, it is structured by the knowledge that we are heading towards a cataclysm; second, there is an expectation derived from the structure of the novel with its separation of four central narrative threads that we are heading towards completeness in terms of the journey of the characters; third, the novel opens with a metanarrative frame, which raises questions we expect to be answered, indeed the prologue ends with the words 'More soon, my dear.'

There are, in fact, two novels called *The Power*: one is the 'novel within a novel', purportedly by Naomi Alderman's male alter-ego: Neil Adam Armon; the second is the complete work including the frame narrative by Naomi Alderman. There are thus two endings, narrative and metanarrative. The narrative ending is at once dramatic, gruesome, portentous, poignant, romantic and apocalyptic and finally, redemptive. It invokes both the Old Testament and Shakespearean drama (though perhaps *Titus Andronicus* rather than *A Midsummer Night's Dream*). The chapter opens with an omniscient overview of the central characters waiting to act, introduced in biblical language, before the focus settles on the murder of the military dictator Tatiana Moskalev: a moment of political treachery that sets

all of the other end-games in motion. Disparate threads of plot are reeled in. In a grisly but unexpectedly poignant scene Roxy finds her skein, harvested as she was held prisoner by her brother Darrell, rotting in a cold store. There is a revelation about Mother Eve's past, giving context to the voices in her head and her volatility. Forces cohere to propel the key actors to a decision that their only option is to 'bomb ourselves back to the Stone Age.' (2016:313). The final scene however, stills these dramatic energies: we see Roxy sitting on balcony over the sea with her father, watching the signs of distant conflict. We expect blame or retribution but what we get is an unexpected moment of redemption in which the father-daughter relationship is restored. The scene combines an unexpected return to the everyday with the two joking and sharing a drink, and it invokes a possible future beyond the Cataclysm: 'Someone's got to survive these things, haven't they? A thought occurs to her. She smiles. "Bet if I had a daughter she'd be strong as fuck." They have another drink before they go down.' (2016:329). This is, I suggest is the emotional landing point of the narrative: a small element of hope held out to the reader. However, the novel has several different modes of storytelling, each of which is addressed by the ending. In the main narrative, each chapter is succeeded by a reproduction of an artefact or document from Neil Adam Armon's historical and archaeological research. These are Neil's equivalent of Briony Tallis's documentary records from the Imperial War Museum, included to convince the reader of the plausibility of the narrative. But Neil is writing for a readership 5000 years in the future; for the present day reader, they point instead to the narrative unreliability and misinterpretation that history is built upon, with the Apple logo, for example, reinterpreted by future archaeologists as a religious symbol or glyph they term the 'bitten fruit motif'. The final artefact in the novel is the Apocrypha from the Book of Eve which warns that everything, and especially structures of power are more complex and impenetrable than we can possibly imagine.

As the novel within a novel concludes, we return to the epistolary metanarrative that bookends the novel: a correspondence between Neil and a patronising, alpha-female, literary grandee called Naomi Alderman who has become his 'first reader'. The frame provides the 'publishing context' of Armon's book with the implied author a member of the 'Men Writers Association', who is struggling to have his work taken seriously despite his meticulous historical research. What it uncovers for Naomi Alderman's present-day reader is an entrenched matriarchal order, built over five thousand years with pre-Cataclysm history suppressed by the structures of religious power and a violent post-Cataclysm

history including routine infanticide and male genital mutilation. The metanarrative is a complex interaction of satirical and transformative purpose. In the final pages, for example, Neil writes to Naomi:

> I really want this book to make something better, N. I think we can be better than this. This thing isn't 'natural' to us, you know? Some of the worst excesses against men were never – in my opinion anyway – perpetrated against women in the time before the Cataclysm. (2016:337)

The reader, of course, knows that he is wrong. One of the 'literary' reading groups I studied in Chapter Six judged the novel cynical and 'not a feminist novel but one about exploitation and repression', a view that is widely shared by popular reviewers on Goodreads and other forums. This passage may indeed be read as satirising Neil's unfounded idealism. But we must also recognise this as one of science fiction's 'inverted narratives'. Our sympathies are with Neil in his struggles to be responsible to his reader and to write a transformative book, rather than with the (fictional) Naomi and her entrenched matriarchal privilege. Looking into the science fictional mirror reveals that the author's challenge may indeed be a book that can 'make something better'. This may be an aspect of the book that SF audiences understand better than literary audiences.

The final line of the metanarrative is far from a 'landing' but it is certainly an ending that forces the reader to think. Naomi writes: 'Neil, I know this might be very distasteful to you, but have you considered publishing this book under a woman's name?' Sam Baker, who judged the Bailey's Prize for Women's Fiction in the year that it was won by *The Power*, described it as her favourite last line of recent fiction: 'really memorable but also it's absolutely right for the book and it taps into what lots of people are thinking and talking about.'

Griffin describes *Never Let Me Go* as a 'critical science fiction', arguing that it 'stands as a corrective to the science fiction of actualisation which constructs biotechnology as political and economic opportunity.' (2009:658). Ishiguro's skill in the subtle manipulation of narrative voice draws the reader into an affective engagement with the narrative and this, in turn, forces us to be critical not only about the bioethical issues but about their treatment within generic science fiction. It is hard to think of *The Power* as a critical science fiction in the same way. It draws not only on the themes, but the apparatus of genre writing, with the intention of appealing to a wide readership across genres: science fiction,

apocalyptic fiction, young adult fiction and political thriller writing. Alderman's aim is both intellectual and ethical engagement; as I have argued, there are significant moments of affective engagement but, in contrast to *Never Let Me Go,* this form of engagement may be secondary to the novel's purpose, which is a forceful critique of patriarchal gender relations. We saw that Alderman's description of the novel was as feminist science fiction: here feminism is the purpose and science fiction the mode of engagement. Kelly and Kessel's definition of 'slipstream' fiction (2006) fits well with *The Power*. The novel violates the tenets of realism with its *novum*. It borrows from popular genres but it is impossible to define the novel through the expectations of genre. With its metanarrative framing, in which the novel is revealed to be a reconstructed history written thousands of years in the future, it adheres to Kelly and Kessel's condition of playful postmodernism and of a fiction that acknowledges, and revels in, its fictionality.

Conclusion

All four of the novels discussed in this chapter are concerned, in their different ways with the role of fiction in enabling us to see the world through a different lens. *The Power* uses the classic SF technique of cognitive estrangement to force us into confrontation with our own dystopian present. *Never Let Me Go* and *Atonement* use narrative voice to reveal the power of fiction in bearing witness and the subtle and unexpected ways the relationship between author, narrator and reader enables it to do this. But the dangers and limitations of fiction are also examined, especially in *Atonement*, where the novel itself is Briony's attempt to atone for her lack of responsibility in using her fictional gifts. In both *Never Let Me Go* and *The Many* we see the power of fiction in giving voice to the unspeakable and thus in allowing us to confront it. We see fiction function as a mode of sense-making but also, paradoxically, as a veil, which in the process of reading the book, the reader is invited to look beneath. In *A God in Ruins* it is the author herself who lifts the veil as an act of narrative sabotage; in *Never Let Me Go*, it is the reader's gradual realisation of what the author is not saying that reveals the veiled truth. In the research conducted for Chapter Six, reading group respondents told me of what they were looking for from literary fictional endings. Answers included an ending that ties up loose ends, an ending that leaves you wanting to think, a plausible or 'authentic' ending, a humane, empathy generating ending and an ending that reveals the purpose of the book. I suggest that the five books studied in this and the previous chapter contain some or all of those aspects in differing proportions.

While there will always be readers who feel let down by endings that leave ends dangling (such as *The Many*), that seem to prioritise cognitive over affective resolution (such as *Atonement*) or that are in some ways implausible or inauthentic (such as *The Power*), all of these endings share the capacity to lift the veil of fiction and to make the reader look at the world differently. This discussion of how fiction can shift our perspective on the world brings me to the question of what kinds of shifts in critical perception are enabled by a knowledge of practice-based discourses and modes of reasoning. I want to suggest that the research has a contribution to make to both literary studies and literary criticism.

The contribution to literary studies comes in my attention to the literary novel as simultaneously an aesthetic and commercial object. Published novels must navigate a process of selection, negotiation, rewriting, editing, positioning, packaging and marketing to an audience. This process determines the published form of the novel; it is part of what determines the critic's response, as well as that of the ordinary reader. In the readings I offer above, I tried to be attentive to this process which, my research suggests, may illuminate aspects of the novel that are otherwise neglected. One way of doing this is to think in terms of the three modes of reading outlined in Chapter Four, but with a slightly different emphasis, with a first reading attentive to the novel as a reading experience and its relationship to its *potential audience* in terms of genre and expectations; a critical reading with a more detailed focus on narrative form, language and the novel's communication to an *imagined audience*; and an attuned reading attentive to the context and manner of publication (e.g. which publishing house, what kind of marketing, paratextual elements) relating to the *intended audience*. As critics, we most regularly engage only in the second of these modes. In Chapter Seven, I quoted Kevin Brophy's suggestion that 'writers read in distinctive ways and for purposes not foregrounded by cultural theorists, literary critics or historians [in]superimposing the sensual and the intellectual' (2003:3). I argued that this is a form of reading shared by members of the literary industry and everyday readers and that this is reflected in their discourse. The first mode of reading may draw attention to the pace at which the novel, or parts of it, are typically read, for example. This is something that novelists, editors and readers talked about regularly in the research. What are the effects – both cognitive and emotional – of an immersive novel that readers are compelled to read at speed? What does this make possible for the author, and how does it become part of their narrative strategy? Is it a marker of genre? With regard to Kate Atkinson's work I suggested that its immersive

qualities have the effect of masking the signs – communicated in the symbols, intertextual references and even in the paratext – that the primary narrative thread is unstable. With regard to the third mode of reading, we might look at the way a book is packaged and marketed as part of its meaning. This may involve (as in my study of *A God in Ruins*) a consideration of paratextual elements, such as the back cover blurb and book design. My aim here is to find modes of engaging with the novel that bring together the concerns of literary studies, creative writing, contemporary book history and reading and publishing studies. Attending to these modes of reading may provide a particularly helpful framework for the development of genetic criticism and textual scholarship on the contemporary novel, offering a holistic approach to the process by which the novel achieves its final form.

In terms of the contribution of the research to literary criticism, I suggested in Chapter Seven that there was a distinct practice-based lexicon in the ways in which authors and publishers talk about fiction, which is mutually recognised, but not generally used within academic literary studies (though it might be more recognised in university creative writing departments). Some key terms here include the use of 'landing' as an alternative or supplement to the critical terms 'closure' and 'completeness' and linked to that the importance of the musicality of endings; the idea of a 'thread that draws the reader through' the narrative, which may be particularly important in holding together a fragmented or highly disrupted narrative. These are terms that express the author's sense of their responsibility to the reader. In analysing *A God in Ruins*, I deployed the concept of landing to interrogate a disparity between cognitive forms of resolution and the emotional effects of the ending. Atkinson's final chapters offers a move towards completeness well before the actual ending, in the sense that the loose ends of narrative are tied up, though in a somewhat performative manner as if the story is being told rather than felt. Closure however, is resisted, since the protagonist (who might have been understood as the central 'thread drawing through' the book) is effectively deleted from the narrative. Rather than a life history, it becomes a novel about absent lives and the instability of time. What Atkinson offers us instead is a form of landing (albeit a highly playful one since her conceit is to avoid actually bringing anything down to earth except the protagonist's fighter plane). But she 'lets the reader gently out into the world' (to use another term from the practice vocabulary), conspiring to detain them long enough, within the utterly transformed narrative, to mourn the missing and make sense of the meaning of his erasure. Her landing is a kind of emotional compensation for the lack of closure and the somewhat perfunctory

and performative completeness. What this suggests is that the three terms: closure, completeness and landing are doing rather different work. If we take closure in narrative as the completion of a journey through narrative, connected to the trajectory of the key actors and with a corresponding sense of psychological resolution, completeness may be understood as a kind of cognitive satisfaction that the evidence has been presented and that at least some threads have been tied up, while landing operates in a more affective register best captured by the analogy with music that several participants made. This suggests that the authorial sense of responsibility to the reader involves the felt experience of the novel and not simply closure or completeness. I noted similar moves in *Never Let Me Go*, a book that opens such a pandora's box of ethical implications that it is hard to read the ending as any kind of closure. It is continually pointing towards completion, in the most sinister possible way, but it stops short of it. However, it could certainly be said to land, with two carefully judged final beats, one devastatingly emotional and the final one a note of resignation with subtle satirical intent.

Conclusion: Endings, Text and Context in Contemporary Literary Studies

Revisiting the Research Questions

I started this thesis with a series of questions about the role of endings in the contemporary novel and a contention that since the novel is a mediated form – an art work that is also a product for exchange – then, as literary scholars we should seek a discourse that enables us to understand the narrative form of the novel not just textually but also contextually. My focus in the thesis has been on endings, as a privileged site in the narrative in terms of both text and context. Endings are one of Rabinowitz's 'rules of notice': a stressed feature in the text on which the reader builds an interpretation: a point at which meaning is made. They are a point at which the relationship between author and reader is made manifest, whether this is (as I suggested in the conclusion to Chapter Eight) a subtle lifting of the veil of fiction, or the unexpected destruction of the fifth wall (as in *A God in Ruins*). The novelist Maggie Gee writes: 'On the last page, the enigmatic transference of meaning from writer to reader is complete, as is the transference of meaning from the empathetic reader to the book.' (Gee 2015). While the first part of this sentence articulates the complex intimacy of exchange between writer and reader, the second part points to the role of endings as a point at which literary judgements are made. These may be textual judgements, whether ethical, intellectual, affective or aesthetic, but they may equally be contextual judgements, of commercial or prize-winning potential or of genre attribution: what does the ending tell us about what kind of book this is? We may see endings, then, as the point in the novel at which the 'veil between worlds' is thinnest: at which reader becomes writer, and book becomes commodity.

Approach

The search for both a textual and a contextual understanding of endings led me to a research design that has strayed well outside the usual methodological boundaries of English research. I began the thesis from within the discipline, starting with an examination of textual approaches to narrative and moving on to look at the development of reader-focused approaches developed by reader-response theorists. I found, however, that the kind of questions I wanted to ask were better served by work in areas such as publishing studies, audience research and the sociology of culture: fields that more commonly conduct research using sociological methods. The thesis thus has a central empirical

component, in which qualitative research methods are used to interrogate the processes of creation, production, consumption and reception of the novel. My aim was to shed light on both the way the novel is mediated through the publishing industry to be 'made public' for an audience and the effects of that work in terms of genre definitions, literary valuing (for example through literary prizes) and commercial success. My approach was to use qualitative research to reconstruct the forms of reasoning through which that mediation takes place with attention to the different actors involved, the discourse used and the place of endings within that process of reasoning. Though I use sociological research methods, the thesis is not intended primarily as a contribution to the sociology of the book. My concern is to enable a joined-up understanding of text and context that brings such extra-disciplinary methodological understandings back into English research. Thus, Part Three is based on the more standard English approach of theoretically informed close readings of literary texts. Here, the outcomes of the qualitative research are used to inform the close readings in three ways. First, it is used to raise overarching themes and concerns that I found repeatedly expressed by the research subjects of Part Two, including the idea of different 'modes of reading' (distinctions between first and second reading, private and communal reading, critical and attuned reading); the author's responsibility to the reader and endings as a marker of genre. Second, it adds a new set of practice-based terms to the critical lexicon, such as the concept of landing explored as an alternative to the academic critical terms 'closure' and 'completeness'. Third it suggests the use of 'outward facing' forms of analysis to supplement the traditional tools of literary close reading. In one of the readings included in Chapter Nine (of Wyl Menmuir's *The Many*) I was able to bring in original data from my research about the creation and production of the book. However, I also wanted to suggest that there are ways of exploring the production and consumption of texts that do not involve gathering extensive primary data. The methods I used included engagement with community reviewing sites (throughout Part Three), media research on the publishing context (used in my discussions of Kate Atkinson and literary-SF novels), analysis of the material form of the book (conducted as part of my reading of Kate Atkinson's *A God in Ruins*) and direct engagement with readers and writers via social media (used in my examination of narrative expectations in science fiction). I do not suggest that any of these are original methodologies to English scholars, only that they are harnessed here for a purpose.

Limitations of the Research

The principal limitation of the research conducted is the relatively small sample size. My research questions required separate investigations of three different groups: authors, literary professionals and readers and they called for thick description of the practical reasoning of the actors involved. The most appropriate methodologies were qualitative and the sample size was consequently limited. The study should thus be seen as indicative rather than representative. It would require further research to assess how robust the empirical findings are. However, the advantage of the relatively small sample size is that it enabled me to bring together and to make comparisons across three fields in a way that is very new within the literature: to my knowledge the only similar research on the contemporary novel in English is Childress's 2017 study of a single novel.

Contribution to Research

The thesis makes both a methodological and a substantive contribution to research. Its methodological contribution has two components. First, it joins up different elements of the qualitative research on literary production and consumption that has emerged in recent years, for example work on editors by Greenberg (2015), Squires (2017) and Henningsgaard (2019) and work on reading groups by Hartley (2001), Long (2003), Peplow et al (2015) and Peplow (2016). The thesis builds on these studies by looking at the complete cycle of creation, production, consumption and reception, while also extending the single-book focus of Childress's study (2017) into a range of different texts and contexts. Second, it makes a case for the use of sociological research methods as a research tool for contemporary literary studies and it shows how these might be used – in this case to approach a particular feature of narrative that is normally considered from 'inside' rather than 'outside' the text. I am not suggesting that contemporary literary studies has a unique responsibility to study context: clearly fiction of all periods bears the influence of the social conditions in which it is produced and consumed and literary research increasingly pays attention to that contextual history. However, historicist methodologies, which necessarily privilege documentary sources, are often inappropriate and unhelpful when it comes to discussing very recent literary production. This thesis demonstrates how methods from sociology – the discipline best equipped to study the *now* and the complex interactions between structures and agents in contemporary society and culture – can be harnessed to fill this lacuna. The sociology of literature is an established field, but it is by

and large a theoretical one. Recent years have seen a number of calls for literary scholars to engage with the institutional context of contemporary fiction (e.g. Malik 2008, Eaglestone 2010, McGurl 2010, Brouilette 2014, Eve 2016) but these scholars have not carried out their own empirical work and they have only rarely taken such institutional engagements back into close readings of particular texts.[76]

The thesis aims to make a substantive contribution in three areas. First, it engages the critical literature on endings and closure, showing the effects of contextual considerations – especially considerations of genre and readership – on their published form. Second, it offers a reconstruction of the spaces of imagination and the processes of reasoning of the 'practitioner' groups studied. It presents a nuanced account of the practices of creation and production, including the often invisible roles of the literary agent and editor, in the development of a published novel that is both an artwork and a craftwork. It also opens a window onto the reception of the literary text, both by prize judges and by reading groups. In considering the latter it goes beyond the 'ideal' reader of reader-response theory, to encompass the widely varying tastes and reading practices of 'ordinary' readers. Third, the thesis draws out similarities and differences between the groups studied, showing that there is an overlapping critical lexicon between the fields of creation and production and the fields of production and reception that is distinct from academic critical literature but can be used to augment it. It then attempts to put that critical language to work, alongside literary critical discourses, in a series of close readings of contemporary novels.

Pointing Outwards

It became apparent to me as I embarked on the close readings that make up Part Three of the thesis that in applying narratological tools to the endings of my chosen texts I was narrowing my focus: the task was close scrutiny of specific textual features and a conscious blurring of those features in my peripheral vision. In contrast, in paying attention to the concepts and lexicon derived from the empirical research resulted in a broadening of focus as I found a new vantage point from which to view the texts and associations between aspects I had not previously considered together. This is not just the obvious point that

[76] Both Brouilette and Eve's books do include close readings, however in both cases the authors select and read thematically rather than attempting any significant methodological innovations. Brouilette studies the role of the writer within the creative economy and Eve the tensions between the world of fiction and academic English. The close readings are used to examine how writers of contemporary fiction engage with, and situate themselves in relation to these themes.

textual analysis is focused while contextual analysis is broad. In Chapter Nine I tried to show the value for a study of narrative of considering overarching themes, such as reader responsibility or genre location. But beyond this I found that engagements with practice-based perspectives frequently signalled separate critical literatures and alternative theoretical approaches, suggesting the potential for future research projects. Sometimes these alternative approaches are lurking in the shadows just beyond the main beam of critical light. For example, in engaging with popular reviews commenting (often with bemusement) on Kate Atkinson's frequent use of prolepsis to temper narrative suspense, I came back to Kermode's discussions of the use of time in the work of Robbe-Grillet (1967:20) and a critical seam of the literature on narrative that I did not pursue in Part One: on the temporality of the novel, which proceeds through Paul de Man (1983) to Mark Currie's work (2013) on the temporal structures that make the unexpected intelligible. Sometimes the research draws attention to discrete fields of critical enquiry: for example agents', publishers' and readers' comments on their affective and visceral responses to literary texts fed into my readings of the affective experience of reading *Never Let Me Go* and the phenomenological experience of reading *The Power*, which in turn pointed to a genre of critical literature on affect and literary appreciation (e.g. Feagin 1996, Warhol 2003, Sedgwick 2003). My examination of ideas of responsibility to the reader, and both readers' and reviewers' perceptions of the controlling nature of McEwan and Atkinson's authorial presence suggested useful engagements with recent work on stylistic manipulation (e.g. Sorlin 2020) and author intentionality (e.g. Mitchell 2008). Discussions of literary valuing with John Sutherland (in relation to literary prizes) and Alessandro Gallenzi (in relation to the 'unsatisfactory' endings of some canonical works) suggested an empirical-institutional study that might be of value to contemporary debates on canonicity (e.g. Hungerford 2016, Sykes, Keeble and De Cristofaro 2019). Thus, in addition to the contributions outlined above, there is a heuristic intent to this thesis: it raises questions well beyond those I have been able to answer.

In *Uses of Literature* (2008:135) Rita Felski notes that 'Literary theory is still struggling to come to terms with […] plurality; it has manifest difficulty in recognising that literature may be valued for different, even incommensurable reasons.' Above all, my aim is to encourage academic English to appreciate the plurality that Felski points to and that I have explored in my research, and to find ways of bringing it into its engagements with, and its readings of, contemporary literature.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Author Interviewees

Natasha Carthew is a working class, rural writer, based in Cornwall. Her 2018 novel *All Rivers Run Free* was published by Riverrun (a literary imprint of Quercus). She has published four Young Adult Novels with Bloomsbury, though as Carthew explained in the interview, she is an 'accidental' YA novelist in that her first literary novel was selected and shaped for this genre by her editor at Bloomsbury. She has also published two volumes of poetry. Carthew's work has been nominated for the Carnegie Medal and shortlisted for the Branford Boase Award.

Claire Fuller is the author of three novels: *Our Endless Numbered Days* (2015) *Swimming Lessons* (2017) and *Bitter Orange* (2018). All are published by Fig Tree (an imprint of Penguin) in the UK and by the literary independent Tin House Books in the US. Her first book won the Desmond Elliot Prize for a debut novel in 2015; her second was shortlisted for the Royal Society of Literature's Encore Award for a second novel in 2018. Fuller embarked on a writing career in her forties, with an MA in Creative Writing at the University of Winchester, after a career in marketing.

Jon Courtenay Grimwood is the author of fifteen science fiction/fantasy novels, originally published by Gollancz SF (though some have now been republished by Orbit.) His 'literary historical novel' *The Last Banquet,* was published by Canongate in 2015 under the name Jonathan Grimwood and his two thrillers, *Moskva* (2016)and *Nightfall Berlin* (2018) were published by Penguin under the name Jack Grimwood. He explained that his different literary pseudonyms were adopted on the advice of publishers for branding reasons.

Mick Jackson is a graduate of the creative writing MA at the University of East Anglia. His four novels: *The Underground Man* (1997), *Five Boys* (2001), *The Widow's Tale* (2010), *Yuki Chan in Bronte Country* (2016) and two short-story collections are published by Faber & Faber (though his first two novels were originally published by Picador). *The Underground Man* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and the Whitbread First Novel Award in 1997 and won the RSL's First Novel award.

Wyl Menmuir's debut novel, *The Many*(2016) was written during an MA in Creative Writing at Manchester Metropolitan University, and acquired by his tutor, Nicholas Royle, in his capacity as commissioning editor for fiction at the literary independent Salt Publishing. It was longlisted for the 2016 Man Booker Prize. He is also an essayist and short-story writer

Barney Norris is an award-winning playwright, poet and novelist. His three novels, *Five Rivers Met On A Wooded Plain* (2016), *Turning for Home* (2018) and *The Vanishing Hours* (2019) are published by imprints of Penguin (Doubleday in hardback, Black Swan in paperback): His first novel won a Betty Trask Award and was shortlisted for the RSL's Ondaatje Prize. Norris is also the author of eight plays and he recently adapted Kazuo Ishiguro's novel *The Remains of the Day* for the stage.

Imogen Robertson is the author of six single-authored novels, five of which are in the 'Crowther & Westerman' series set in the late Eighteenth Century, published by Headline. Her standalone novel, *The Paris Winter* was published by Headline in 2013. She is also the co-author, with Wilbur Smith, of *King of Kings*, published by Bonnier Zaffre in 2019, the co-author with Darby Kealey of *Liberation* (2020), published under the pseudonym of Imogen Kealey and she has co-written a political thriller, *The House*, with politician Tom Watson, due for publication in 2020. Robertson is Chair of the Historical Writers' Association and has been shortlisted three times for the Crime Writers' Association's (CWA) Dagger awards.

Appendix 2: Questions to Authors

Introductory Questions

Can you talk me through the process of writing your most recent novel?

How much did you research and plan in advance and at what point did you conceive the ending?

How would you describe it the ending?

What effect do you want the novel, and the ending in particular, to have on your reader?

Did the ending change during the process of rewriting or editing?

Creative Practice

Can you talk me through your typical process in planning, writing and editing a novel?

Are there differences in practice from book to book?

Do you have an ending in mind as you write?

What is the most difficult part of the writing process?

What does it feel like to write an ending?

Do you think about the reader as you are writing?

Reading

What kind of endings do you most like as a reader, e.g. open, or tied up, clever or emotionally satisfying?

Do you tend to write the kind of endings you like to read?

Does other writers' work help you with making decisions about your own, and how?

Can you tell me about a book with an ending you judge to be very effective?

Can you tell me about a book with an ending you didn't like or you do not think works.

Editing

At what point do you send the manuscript to your agent or editor?

What happens after you have submitted a first draft?

What is the balance of editing work between your agent and your editor?

Do you have any involvement from other publishing staff, or editors in different territories?

Which aspects of the novel do your agent/editor focus on most?

Do your endings change during the editing process?

Situating your Work

How would you situate yourself as a writer in terms of genre?

Do you think of literary fiction as a separate genre, and how would you define it?

What do you think readers are looking for in literary fiction?

Are there types of ending that define the literary novel?

Further Questions

How important do you think endings are to readers?

What role does the ending have in the success of a novel?

How important are endings to literary prizes?

Has any of your work been adapted for TV or film? What role did the ending have in this? (e.g. was it changed?)

Appendix 3: Literary Industry Interviewees

Literary Agents

Lucy Luck has been an agent for twenty-two years, running her own agency for eight years before joining Aitken Alexander Associates. Since 2016 she has been with Conville & Walsh. Her clients include Catherine O'Flynn (*What was Lost)* and Andrew Michael Hurley (*The Loney).* Books she has represented have been listed for and awarded prizes including The Booker Prize, the Women's Prize for Fiction, the Costa First Novel Prize, The Goldsmiths Prize and The Desmond Elliott Prize.

Laura Williams worked for the large Peters Fraser and Dunlop Agency at the time of our interview. She has since moved to Greene & Heaton. With eight years' experience as an agent, she is still actively building a client list. She has represented Gabriel Packard and Barney Norris since their debut novels. The latter is interviewed in Chapter Four.

Gordon Wise has been in the publishing industry since 1989, working as a bookseller, an editor and as publishing director for Pan Macmillan and John Murray/Hachette before joining Curtis Brown as an agent in 2005. He was named Agent of the Year at the British Book Industry Awards in 2015 and was President of the Association of Authors' Agents from 2016 to 2018. His fiction authors include Deborah Moggach (*These Foolish Things, Tulip Fever*) and Hannah Kent (*Burial Rites*) and he represents early career authors such as the crime writer Nicolás Obregón (*Blue Light Yokohama*, *Sins as Scarlet*) with whom he works closely. A significant proportion of his work is in handling a large client list of major figures: he is the UK agent for American authors including Bret Easton Ellis and Karl Marlantes and he represents the literary estates of Nina Bawden, Malcolm Bradbury and Brian Aldiss.

Bryony Woods started her career as a bookseller, before joining the Caroline Sheldon Literary Agency in 2010 and co-founding her own agency with Ella Diamond Kahn in 2012. Woods and Diamond Kahn were both named in The Bookseller's list of Rising Stars in 2013.

Editors

Alessandro Gallenzi co-founded Alma Books with his wife Elisabetta Minervini in 2005. Alma specialises in contemporary literary fiction and classics. Gallenzi has run Calder Books (the maverick independent, founded in 1949) since John Calder retired in 2008. Prior to Alma, Gallenzi and Minervini set up Hesperus Press in 2001. Gallenzi is both a hands-on literary publisher and a prize-winning translator, poet, playwright and novelist.

Helen Garnons Williams is Publishing Director of 4th Estate, now the literary division of Harper Collins, though it was an independent literary publisher from 1984 to 2000. She has acquired and edited literary fiction for 20 years, working for Hodder and Stoughton, Weidenfeld & Nicholson and Bloomsbury. Her authors include Stephen Kelman and Jon McGregor and Naomi Alderman.

Juliet Mabey co-founded Oneworld with her husband Novin Doostdar in 1986. She has published literary fiction since 2009, specialising in intelligent literary novels from around the world, a significant proportion of them in translation. She was Editor of the Year at the British Book Industry Awards in 2017. Mabey's authors at Oneworld won The Booker Prize two years running, in 2015 with *A Brief History of Seven Killings* by Marlon James and in 2016 with *The Sellout* by Paul Beatty.

Alexandra Pringle was Group Editor-in-Chief of Bloomsbury at the time of our interview. In 2019 she moved to a role as Executive Publisher. She has been a publisher of literary fiction since 1978 when she joined Virago to edit the Virago Modern Classics series. She has also been Editorial Director of Hamish Hamilton and was for five years a literary agent, with clients including Amanda Foreman, Maggie O'Farrell and Ali Smith. She has been at Bloomsbury since 1999, publishing a list of authors including Margaret Atwood, William Boyd, Richard Ford, Jhumpa Lahiri, Colum McCann, George Saunders and Kamila Shamsie.

Literary Prize Judges

Sam Baker is a magazine editor, book critic and novelist. She was a judge for the Costa Book Prize in 2012 (won by Hilary Mantel's *Bring up the Bodies*), the Desmond Elliott Prize in 2016 (won by Lisa McInerney's *The Glorious Heresies*) the Baileys Women's Prize for

Fiction in 2017 (won by Naomi Alderman's *The Power*), and on three occasions for the British Book Awards (the 'Nibbies'): in 2016 (Début Award, won by Andrew Michael Hurley for *The Loney*), 2017 (Book of the Year, won by Sarah Perry for *The Essex Serpent*) and 2019 (Book of the Year, won by Sally Rooney for *Normal People*).

John Sutherland is an academic, writer and columnist. He judged The Booker Prize in 1999 (when it was won by J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*) and was Chair of Judges in 2005 (when it was won by John Banville's *The Sea*). Sutherland was a controversial judge on both occasions, criticised for leaking details of disagreements between the judges in 1999 and for bestowing his casting vote on John Banville, rather than Kazuo Ishiguro for *Never Let Me Go* in 2005.

Appendix 4: Questions to Agents and Editors

Introductory Questions

How would you describe your list?

Do you think of literary fiction as a separate genre, and how would you define it?

What do you think readers are looking for in literary fiction?

What are the key trends in literary fiction at the moment? What are agents and editors most looking for right now?

Selection

What do you look for in a submission?

Thinking about literary fiction specifically, which aspects of the submission are most important?

Is the ending considered at this stage, and if so how is it considered?

To what extent are you driven by literary prizes?

Are film/TV rights a consideration in your judgement at this stage?

Editing

Can you tell me about the process of working with the author on the manuscript?

Can you give me an example of how you have developed a book with one of your authors?

How frequently do you work on endings and what sort of work do you do?

Can you give me an example of your work on an ending with one of your authors?

How is your editing work different with literary fiction and commercial fiction?

(For agents) Do you find that editors sometimes disagree with editing work you have done with the author and want to change it, or do editors do different kinds of editing from the work you do?

Have you experienced any conflict between editors in different territories over features of the narrative, especially the ending?

Endings

How important are endings to you, as a reader and as an agent or editor?

Do you have a personal preference for particular styles of ending, e.g. do you like open endings, or endings with more resolution, or are you relatively open-minded on this?

What do you think about endings with a twist?

How important do you think endings are to readers?

What role does the ending have in the success of a novel?

How important are endings to literary prizes?

Are there types of ending that define the literary novel?

Favourite and least-favourite recent endings

Can you tell me about a book with an ending you judge to be very effective? (it doesn't have to be one of yours!)

Can you tell me about a book with an ending you didn't like or you do not think works.

Further Questions

Does the way you work with your authors change through their career?

Do you think about TV and film rights when you are working on a book, and do endings play a role in whether books have that kind of potential?

What is your view of the current climate for literary fiction publishing?

Appendix 5: Reading Group Survey Questions

Section One: About Your Reading Group

1. Where is the group based? (town/village and county)
2. Where does the group meet? (e.g. someone's house, workplace, bookshop, library, café)
3. Does the group have a name?
4. How often does the group meet?
5. How long has the group been established?
6. How many members does the group have?
7. How many are women and how many men?
8. What is the age range of the group?
9. What is your occupation? (if filling in as an individual). If completing questionnaire as a group please give some sample occupations of group members.

Section Two: The Books

1. What kind of books does the group prefer? (Tick any that apply.)
    - Classics
    - Recent literary fiction
    - Crime fiction
    - Historical fiction
    - Science fiction
    - Non fiction
    - A mixture
    - Other .....
2. Please list some of the books the group has read recently.
3. Which of these books did the group most enjoy, and why?
4. Which of these books did the group least enjoy, and why?
5. Did any books completely divide the group? If so, which and why?
6. What books do the group plan to read next?
7. How are books selected for the group?

- We take it in turns to suggest a book
- Books are pre-selected by the organiser of the group
- We have a list of available books from the library

- We make a collective decision at a previous meeting
- Other .....

8. Are literary prize shortlists a relevant factor in the selection of books?
- Yes
- No
- Sometimes

9. Are book reviews a factor?

- Yes
- No
- Sometimes

Section Three: Discussing the Books

1. Which aspects of the book are most frequently discussed at book group meetings? (Tick any that apply.)

- The characters
- Style
- Voice/narrator
- Setting
- The opening of the novel
- The ending of the novel
- Elements that were difficult to understand
- Particular passages that group members pick out
- The author (biography, other books etc.)
- Whether you liked or didn't like the book
- Whether you thought it was good/well written
- Other .....

2. How prominent a role do the endings of novels play in the discussion?
3. Thinking about the books the group particularly liked – how relevant was the ending to this judgement?

4. Thinking about the books the group disliked – how relevant was the ending to this judgement?

5. Thinking about books that divided the group – was the ending part of the reason for disagreement?

6. Is there any preference among group members for particular types of ending? (Tick any that apply.)

- Tying up some or all 'loose ends'
- Open ending that makes you think
- Endings with a 'twist'

- Circular structure – something at the end that goes back to the beginning
- Epilogue – taking the story further
- Endings that give you a new perspective on the story
- Other .....

Please add any comments on the selections above, or describe other kinds of endings that you or the group particularly admire. Specific examples of books are very welcome.

7. Do you have different expectations of the endings of 'literary novels' (e.g. Man Booker Prize winners) and for more 'popular' novels (e.g. thrillers or historical novels)?

I am hoping to visit a selection of the reading groups who have responded to this questionnaire. I would attend a regular meeting – either as a participant or an observer, whichever the group feels comfortable with. After the regular meeting I would like to have a short discussion focusing on the role of endings in the experience of reading. If the members of your group may be willing to participate in this way, please provide contact details below. Please be assured that all participants in the reading group study will be anonymous.

Contact name, email address and/or phone number:

Dates of future meetings (if arranged):

Thank you very much for your help with my research.

Appendix 6: Background Data from Reading Groups

Questionnaire Responses

I received 43 completed questionnaire responses from 41 reading groups, varying in the level and detail of response provided. 39 of the responses were from an individual representing a group (typically having discussed the questions with the group); however, in 3 cases I received more than one response from the same group (3 from Topsham, 2 from Bampton, 2 from Good Reads in Leeds) and one individual responded on behalf of 3 reading groups (Good Reads, Feminist Book Club and Apocalyptic/Dystopian Book Club, all in Leeds).

Geographical Profile

Half of the questionnaire respondents were from London and the South East, of which 8 groups were in Winchester[77] and 4 in London. There were 3 groups from the Southwest, 6 from the Northwest, 3 from Yorkshire, 3 from Scotland and 1 from the Midlands. I had 5 international respondents: 4 from Australia and 1 from Canada.

Gender and Age Profile

A common feature is that the majority of reading group members are women. Of the 41 groups, 32 were all-women groups, one was an all-male group and 8 were mixed groups.[78] Some groups commented on the gender balance:

> Ratio is probably about 4:1 women: men.
> (Good Reads in Leeds)
>
> All women. I originally invited two men, but one never came and one stopped coming.
> (Winchester group)

[77] The large number of respondents from Winchester may be explained by the fact that the survey was disseminated via the University of Winchester intranet (among many other channels), and by my attendance early in the study at a bookshop reading group in Winchester, where participants assisted me in 'snowballing' to recruit friends who were members of other reading groups.
[78] One respondent belonged to 3 groups, 2 of which had all female members.

The average age of reading group across the survey was 50, though the range was very wide. A majority of groups seem to be composed of members of a broadly coherent age bracket, for example the V & A group in London has members from 24 to 32 and there were a large number of groups comprised of 50 somethings and 60 somethings (e.g. Sydney, Burghfield Common, Stockport). But a number of groups were much more varied, with participants from their 20s to their 70s. This included a 'drop in' Waterstones bookshop group but it was also a characteristic of some of the village groups especially those set up in conjunction with the local library (for example the Bampton group reported members from 40–80 years old). The youngest group was in Preston, Lancashire with members from 18 –25 and the oldest in Dummer, Hampshire with members from 65–95.

Occupational Profile

A wide range of occupational backgrounds were recorded including health workers, financial service workers, marketing executives, civil servants, office administrators, librarians, publishers, teachers, students, stay at home mothers, retirees, hairdressers, musicians, a pub landlady and a sailor.

Group Organisation

The majority of groups (23 of 41) meet once a month, but meetings every 6 or 8 weeks were also common. Most groups (26 of 41) rotate around members houses, but 10 meet in pubs or restaurants and 2 move between public spaces (pubs or parks) and people's houses. There were 2 workplace groups and one bookshop group. None of the groups met in libraries. A small number of groups do rely on a local library to supply their books, though there seemed to be frustrations with the supply of books:

> We never know what Oxford libraries are going to send us next and sometimes they send books that we have not shortlisted.
> (Bampton group)

> [We read] what we get sent by the local library, which often bears no relation to the list of books we submit to the library each year.
> (Dummer group)

> We used to use the book club lists in the library but logistically it didn't work. Now we enjoy the big reveal at the meeting as the person whose turn it is says what the next book is.
> (Winchester group)

Group Profile

Some groups are very longstanding. 5 had been going 20 or more years. A North London group answered 'Years & years! Maybe 20ish, with some original members still there', while a Sydney group responded 'So long I can't remember. 11 had met for between 10 and 20 years and another 6 for more than 5 years. At the other end of the scale 14 groups had been established in the last 2 years.

Reading Profile

7 groups read exclusively recent literary fiction, 13 groups said that they read 'a mixture', 18 groups specified that they read literary fiction and other genres including, classics (10 groups), crime fiction (2 groups), historical fiction (5 groups), SF/fantasy fiction (4 groups) and non-fiction (6 groups).
1 group was exclusively focused on books by authors from the African diaspora, 1 focused exclusively on SF/fantasy and 1 on apocalyptic and dystopian fiction.

Focus Groups

Following receipt of the questionnaires, I attended meetings of 4 groups that had offered relatively fuller responses to the questionnaire and that reflected the overall balance of the make-up of the groups. One of these was a large, mixed, drop-in group at a bookshop, which I attended twice. One was an all-female work-place group at the V & A Museum in London, with a young membership, 2 were all-female village groups: one of which was library affiliated (though they met in members' houses) and welcomed new members, the other a closed group, established 13 years ago with 10 members, the majority of whom attend every meeting. They told me: 'We don't have other people because otherwise it all falls apart', although 'we do have special guests once in a blue moon'. They added: 'You are a special guest, but you're not asked either. You mayn't join!'

I engaged with these groups as a participant-observer (and attended one group twice in this role) in order to get a deeper understanding of how they operated in practice. At 3 of these groups I was able to conduct focus groups to discuss their responses in more depth (the 4th was a lunch-time meeting at a workplace that was time-limited).